Brief overview of the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme

We are strongly dependent on the natural world. All species of plants and animals, taken together, provide a vital foundation for our health and economy. However, gaps are appearing in that foundation: excess nitrogen is causing a growing number of species to vanish from our natural areas. The Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Act (*Wet stikstofreductie en natuurverbetering*) formalises our commitment to improving the natural environment and reducing nitrogen deposition. This Act is being implemented through the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme, which is also responsible for implementing the measures, monitoring in the interim and adjusting these actions as needed.

What we aim to achieve: reducing nitrogen deposition and improving the natural environment
The core aim of the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme is to strengthen the natural environment. In doing so, the programme focuses on two goals:

1. reducing nitrogen deposition in nitrogen-sensitive nature areas (areas within the Natura 2000 network) in order to comply with the statutory environmental standards set out in the Nature Conservation Act (*Wet Natuurbescherming*);
2. improving the quality of nature by meeting what are known as the conservation objectives in nitrogen-sensitive nature areas. The underlying aim is to restore our natural environment to its proper condition.

Achieving our nature-related goals will require a major reduction in the nitrogen deposition in nitrogen-sensitive nature areas. To that end, nitrogen reduction targets have been established. These are known as the environmental standards, in connection with which the Dutch government has an obligation to achieve results. The Act sets out a number of environmental standards. For instance: nitrogen deposition on at least 40 per cent of the surface area of the nitrogen-sensitive nature areas within the Natura 2000 network must be reduced to less than the critical deposition load by 2025. This applies for 50 per cent of the areas by 2030 and 74 per cent by 2035. The critical deposition load is the threshold above which the quantity of nitrogen deposition poses a risk to the quality of the nature area in question. The coalition agreement of the newly formed Dutch government (the fourth Rutte cabinet) includes an agreement to shorten the deadline for achieving this objective: nitrogen deposition in at least 74 per cent (rather than 50 per cent) of the nitrogen-sensitive nature areas within the Natura 2000 network must be less than the critical deposition load by 2030. This initial edition of the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme has not yet been updated to reflect these revised objectives.

What we will do to achieve this
The Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme entails execution obligations and agreements for the different parties involved. Various national government ministries and regional provinces in the Netherlands are working together to tackle the issue of nitrogen, each from within their own area of responsibility. The programme effectively integrates all components of the comprehensive approach to nitrogen:

- measures to reduce nitrogen emissions at their source;
- measures to strengthen nature;
- a strategy for drawing up area plans;
- a means of quantifying the condition of nature (such as compiling analyses of nature-related objectives) and of monitoring progress and adjusting the course of action.

How we intend to do it: national and area-specific focus, with the help of all sectors
The national government and provinces are working together, based on their respective areas of responsibility, to develop measures to strengthen nature and reduce nitrogen deposition. This is being accomplished via – on one hand – national source measures intended to reduce nitrogen emissions at their source, such as subsidy schemes for innovation and increasing sustainability. And on the other hand, measures are being implemented to restore the natural environment in and around nitrogen-sensitive nature areas. A large portion of these measures are already in effect or under development, and all sectors – industry, agriculture, traffic, shipping

and aviation – are contributing equally to that end.
In addition to national measures, there will also be case-by-case consideration of what is necessary to meet the statutory environmental standards in each area. The Netherlands is, after all, made up of different areas, and the nitrogen deposition, the effects of that deposition, the condition of the natural environment and the socio-economic context vary from one area to another. The dry heaths in Drenthe, for example, are quite different from the peat wetlands of South Holland. Because these areas differ from one another, they must be approached differently as well, with individual solutions.

What we are doing now and what will happen later
This initial edition of the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme consists of agreements and measures already announced by the previous Dutch government, the third Rutte cabinet.
In January 2022, the new government (the fourth Rutte cabinet) was sworn in, and its coalition agreement included the provision that the environmental standards for nitrogen reduction must be reached at an earlier date. By 2030, at least 74 per cent (rather than 50 per cent) of the nitrogen-sensitive nature areas within the protected Natura 2000 network must have a healthy nitrogen load. To meet this target and achieve the objectives in connection with nature, water quality, soil and climate, the new government has earmarked a further 25 billion euros in addition to the existing budget resources for nitrogen and nature-related measures established by the previous government (7 billion euros).

The tightened target for nitrogen reduction will be formalised in an amendment to the Nature Conservation Act. Meeting this target will require an acceleration and expansion of the nitrogen strategy currently under development. This initial edition of the programme does not yet reflect the revised objectives and approach. The Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme has a term of six years and will be updated in the interim in order to remain in line with new knowledge and developments. The existing programme will serve as a basis for the systemic approach to nitrogen and, from mid-2023, will be supplemented with current information from the area plans, analyses of nature-related objectives and monitoring, as well as the government's new plans.

Consultation regarding the programme
The programme will be available for inspection by the general public from 25 May through 5 July 2022. This means that, during that period, anyone may read and/or respond to the documents. The Dutch government will evaluate all responses submitted and adjust the programme as needed. If all goes according to schedule, the programme will be definitively enacted in autumn 2022. As previously described, the programme is subject to further updates based on the information currently available or in the event progress is determined to be insufficient to meet the targets on time.

Working towards a strong and resilient natural environment
The national and area-specific measures are together intended to ensure that the nitrogen-sensitive nature areas in the Netherlands are restored to a strong and healthy condition. Unlike the earlier Integrated Approach to Nitrogen framework, the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme is not a system aimed at fostering the development of a scheme for permits. As the programme strives to preserve and restore the natural environment, it also contributes to mitigating obstacles to economic and social activities. That being said, improving the natural environment is the main priority of the programme.