

BELGIAN GOOD PRACTICE

GRAVEL SECTOR TRANSITION FUND

Background

Gravel has been extracted in Flanders in the Maas basin in Limburg since the middle of the last century. Historically, one can situate the start of gravel extraction activities in the Maasland region of Limburg in the course of the 1950's and early sixties.

The extraction was done carelessly, with insufficient attention for the consequences. Farmers, nature and the population were the victims. The patrons of the gravel and concrete sector made fortunes out of it. The trade unions ran with the unlimited exploitation story.

Gravel had a bad name for a long time. There were many opportunists in the business, who took what they could get and didn't care about anything or anyone. They saw how concrete makers in the 1960s and 70s were desperate for affordable gravel, for the freeways in Belgium and the Delta works in the Netherlands.

But : by the end of the 1970s, resistance to the extraction had increased to such an extent that the economic aspects to such an extent that the economic aspects of the exploitation on the one hand and the importance of supplying raw materials on the other hand had been pushed into the background, and complaints took the upper hand. The commotion around planned new gravel extraction areas continued to grow, especially from an ecological point of view. The spatial carrying capacity was in danger of being greatly exceeded at the expense of valuable nature reserves and rich agricultural land. Residential areas became isolated, surrounded by deep puddles.

At the end of the 1980s, environmental associations, farmers, politicians, employers and employees were all at each other's throats with their views on gravel extraction. The Minister of Economy, Norbert De Batselier, wanted to put an end to a quarter century of Limburg bickering and political indecision.

Workers in the gravel industry in Limburg took action to save the gravel. Gravel companies were shut down and trucks and concrete mixers blocked traffic in Hasselt. But at the same time, unions apparently already realized that they were fighting a losing battle and expressed all their wishes concerning compensations, a social fund and possible severance payments "equal to those of the Limburg miners".

The gravel decree: strong government approach as a concept

In 1993, Minister De Batselier developed a transition plan for the sector that would be strongly driven by the government. After all, it was stated that the economic surplus from gravel mining, which was considered small for the region, did not outweigh the ecological damage caused in the region. The proposed phase-out period of approximately 15 years was considered sufficient to allow

the sector involved to adapt to this perspective on the one hand, and to concretize the search for alternatives to gravel use on the other hand.

Legislation was drawn up for this purpose: the gravel decree.

The goal was a total stop to production, which would come into effect on January 1, 2006.

The gravel companies were given quotas and a phasing-out scenario with the decree. The Gravel Decree stipulated that gravel extraction as the main production was possible until the predetermined decreasing production quotas were met. A gravel tax had to be paid into a fund, for each tonne of extracted gravel. The money from the fund was to be used to finance utility works for the rearrangement of the landscape, the social reconversion of the sector and the search for alternatives to gravel.

It was believed that in the meantime sufficient sustainable alternatives for the Limburg gravel would be developed.

A **research committee** actively searched for substitute aggregates and supported their commercialization. Part of the fund was thus reserved to finance research work aimed at the development of substitute gravel, its marketing and use.

A **social committee** provided support for the hundreds of people who would lose their jobs as a result of the decree. The social committee was looking into the social support measures for the conversion of gravel extraction areas through a policy plan. It was being worked out for workers in the sector who would be affected by measures in the gravel decree. The plan provided for concrete rights and modalities in several fields : outplacement, training, early retirement , financial rewards when leaving the company, ...

That plan was funded from the Fund. The approach continues even in 2021.

A **Restructuring Committee** was responsible for the redevelopment of the already extracted areas.

The decree laid down the margins within which the annual revenues of the Gravel Fund were distributed among the various committees.

2009: a different course

In 2005 it had already become clear that for barely a tenth of the applications of gravel, solid, sustainable alternatives had been found. The search for alternatives was actually a flop. The results of the research programs of the research committee were not such that a drastic reduction of the quota was possible.

But in the meantime, it also became clear that truly responsible gravel extraction would eventually create opportunities for nature development, recreation, agriculture and even water management or the elimination of land surpluses. Provided that gravel extraction is done correctly, with respect for the carrying capacity, and with a social consensus. And with a very thorough and strictly defined and respected restoration of the areas.

So there were plenty of reasons for all those involved to adopt a constructive attitude and to work together to reach a good agreement and to amend the decree. An amended decree was thus drawn up, which abolished the absolute stop.

On April 3, 2009, the Flemish government approved an amendment to the decree. The unlimited gravel extraction remains finite, but commercial gravel extraction remains possible on the condition that it is approached on a project basis, with the approval of all parties and a previously clearly defined future. The industry called it : the beginning of an era where ecological, economic and social interests go hand in hand.

Since then, gravel extraction is commercially possible under strict conditions and in the following 3 cases:

-Gravel extraction as a side production to the extraction of underlying quartz sand

-Gravel extraction for infrastructure works

-Project gravel extraction , this is gravel extraction that goes hand in hand with the realization of a social project of great public interest that in itself is not aimed at the extraction of gravel.

In any case, the ecological and spatial patrimony must be restored afterwards.

After approval of the additional decree, the gravel sector immediately started setting up the first projects both to extract gravel and to develop a social project. The 'Elerweerd' project is the pilot project that is still underway as part of the implementation of the renewed decree.

The approach to the transition, the concept and the practice: evaluation

The gravel decree is essentially the decretal translation of a policy option that was chosen in the early 1990s on the basis of the data available at that time. At the time, it was considered that the economic and social benefits of gravel extraction did not outweigh the damage to the environment and the environment.

It was assumed that within the established time perspective gravel as a raw material could be replaced by substitute materials, and the balance could be imported from abroad.

So a phase-out of the sector would be possible.

The decree was strict. The industrial gravel sector was going to die out. And in the meantime, a levy had to be paid to finance the Gravel Fund. This levy was to be used almost entirely for the stated objectives, particularly 'restructuring', 'social guidance' and 'research into alternative materials'.

It was a real shockwave! The sector took a new start : suddenly it was possible to work differently. With respect for the landscape, farmers, nature and employees. With good results, because the resistance disappeared, the results were achieved, a new consensus emerged.

After about twelve years, the decree was amended.

Where are we today?

The restructuring committee has worked well. A modus vivendi in terms of approach has been found and the results are good. The landscape is respected. The damage is repaired and the areas are returned to nature. The farmers are compensated, the livability of the villages is safeguarded. On a spatial level, wild clearings have given way to well-organized and controllable clearings. The sector has gradually adapted to the regulations in force.

The social committee has also worked well. The social measures for the workers have been realized.

The weakest part of the story is finding alternatives to gravel and stimulating new activity in that area. Perhaps too little pressure was applied to find solutions and the unfeasibility of these alternatives was emphasized too easily.... and the focus shifted to the continuation of gravel extraction. Until today, the results of the research committee are not such that a conversion of the gravel sector would be possible.

Although a broad consensus has been found in Limburg, things do not always work out between the companies and the government. Five years ago, the Gravel Fund no longer knew what it would do with the savings pot, which at that time amounted to 16 million euros. The gravel sector asked for the money back, but had to back down. The folds have now been smoothed out again.

The famous 'Elerweerd' project finally received a permit in 2019, but there remains unease about whether the social interest is so great. And whether nature is being properly respected.

All is not completely well, in other words. But the old negative gravel extraction is a business that is really coming to an end. So all in all, this is a successful transition story.