

Maintaining waterways

The main audit question was: What preconditions does the information base used in steering the maintenance of waterways provide for effective activities? In this connection the audit strove to determine, among other things, how well objectives with regard to preserving the condition and value of waterway assets as well as the service level of the waterway network have been achieved.

The annual cost of maintaining waterways has been around 75 million euros. At the end of 2008 the balance sheet value of waterways was about 190 million euros. The replacement value has not been calculated and the balance sheet value does not include the ice-breakers owned by the Finnish Shipping Enterprise (Finstaship). In recent years the Finnish Maritime Administration has invested about 10 million euros a year in waterways. The social significance of maintaining waterways appears to be considerably larger than the amount of budget funds used for this purpose.

The audit observed that objectives with regard to maintaining the waterway assets for which the state is responsible or the level of maintenance have not been specified unequivocally and clearly in provisions or in positions or plans approved by Parliament or the ministry. Objectives have been vague and open to interpretation at a more detailed level.

The Finnish Maritime Administration's annual report documents in recent years show that the number of commercial waterways in poor condition has decreased and the number of waterways meeting higher service levels has slowly grown. This information together with other information on the waterway network suggest that the average condition and service level of waterways have improved. The Finnish Maritime Administration has repeatedly stated, however, that the need for repairing and renewing waterways exceeds what is possible with the funds that have been appropriated for this purpose. The need for additional funds has reportedly increased clearly compared with previous years.

In the opinion of the National Audit Office, the need for additional funds and its repetition in different documents and plans is partly due to the fact that maintenance needs and projects described as maintenance have included not only measures required to maintain and restore the original level but also measures that have clearly improved the original level, such as straightening and deepening waterways, widening bends and narrow channels, and improving the level of safety equipment. There is no upper limit on such measures that improve the original level, so these can always be added to maintenance or basic waterway management plans if one accepts that they are included in the concept of maintenance and basic waterway management. If this is done, different plans can repeatedly point to the need for additional funds by citing the poor condition of waterways and the need to restore or improve them. This weakens the clarity and information value of plans and appeals for additional funds.

This way of acting and in general the inaccuracy of the picture that is given concerning the maintenance of waterways is, in the opinion of the National Audit Office, increased by the fact that concepts regarding waterway maintenance and the intended content of the concepts that are used vary in different documents. Waterway maintenance and the functions included in it have been classified and divided in slightly different ways and using slightly different concepts and terms in different documents. The Ministry of Transport and Communications has said that it will strive in future to harmonize the concepts and terms that are used in waterway maintenance.

Presenting very broad and detailed reviews of waterways and waterway sections in upper-level documents would reduce these plans' information value for decision-makers, since it would be difficult and laborious to obtain an overall picture of the transport network, objectives and reasoning from plans.

The National Audit Office considers that in order to improve Parliament's real steering power, deciding on the maintenance of the waterway network should be left up to Parliament in a clearer form by bringing significant and essential solutions up for debate. Measures needed to maintain or restore the original condition of waterways and the resources required for this purpose on the one hand and measures that essentially improve the original level and the

resources required for this purpose should be clearly separated, for example in the commentary to the items in the budget proposal. The costs of both types of measures could be bundled in individual projects, but the two categories' shares of measures should be presented more clearly than at present. The goal should be to give a clearer picture of when the purpose is to maintain the original level of waterways and when the purpose is to improve it.

In the opinion of the National Audit Office, if it is not possible to finance all the proposed maintenance projects and there are no precise feasibility calculations regarding the order of projects, measures needed to maintain and restore the original condition of waterways should be given priority over measures designed to improve the original level. Such repairs should be carried out before the deterioration of structures and the increase in repair costs begin to accelerate. In order to avoid such a "repair liability", consideration should also be given to the possibility of postponing some large development projects. In waterways the repair liability does not appear to be very large, with estimates ranging from 8-35 million euros.

The audit also drew attention to development needs to improve certain waterway management and maintenance activities, such as the clarification of costs and the division of labour between waterway managers and operators.