

THE CONTROL OF ENVIRONMENTAL PERMITS

particularly with regard to air protection

The environmental permit system is subject to the provisions in the Environmental Protection Act which came into force in March 2000. It was previously subject to the provisions in the Act on Environmental Permit Procedure. Environmental permits are used mainly to regulate emissions and other environmental impacts from individual sources such as industrial and energy plants. The present audit evaluated how well the control of environmental permits meets the requirements for control. Proper control is a necessary condition for the effectiveness of the environmental permit system.

Air protection was selected as a special focus of the audit. The audit materials include regional environment centres' environmental permit decisions in 1996-2000 with documents. Decisions were issued mainly on the basis of the Act on Environmental Permit Procedure. The Environmental Protection Act provided for new environmental permit authorities to resolve permit matters regarding significant environmental impacts.

The regional environment centres which are responsible for control spent around FIM 7.5 million in wages and salaries on environmental permit activities in 2001. The system's indirect economic benefit is visible in the improvement of the state of the environment or the maintenance of a good level and in the consequent avoidance of environmental costs. Cleaning and restoring a contaminated land area can cost millions of euros, for example.

On the basis of the audit it is the opinion of the State Audit Office that the environmental permit system as a whole operates fairly well. The environmental permit system is comprehensive especially with regard to individual sources of emissions such as industrial and energy plants. Environmental decisions concerning these have usually dealt quite broadly with emissions and resulting environmental and health impacts. In some cases permits were not obtained for smaller-scale or unestablished activities, however.

The audit indicated that the permit decisions issued by regional environment centres have differed considerably in terms of structure and the presentation of information. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the form of permit

decisions should be developed and the preparation of decisions should be supported with the help of information systems.

On the basis of the audit, there were considerable differences between centres in how strictly emission and control regulations were applied. Businesses and authorities have also disagreed on the actual level of emissions as well as emission measurement and calculation methods. Permit regulations concerning emissions and emission monitoring were also dealt with in the report of a working party on the control of environmental permits. The report was completed during the audit. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the report as such cannot serve as a guideline for the environment centres, however.

The audit indicated that control has not been systematic in all respects. The State Audit Office believes that a key reason for this is that control requirements have not been clearly specified. Control planning has been based largely on resources rather than control requirements. It was also observed in the audit that itemized and comparable information is not available regarding time spent on control and control performances.

At the time of the audit the environment centres had not been given guidelines on the preparation of control plans. The plans which were prepared by the environment centres during the audit did not follow a uniform structure. The State Audit Office considers it advisable that control plans be prepared according to a uniform structure and specifications based on the general requirements for control.

The implementation of control relies essentially on the in-house control of activities and emissions, which is subject to outside monitoring. The audit indicated that there is room for improvement in control activities. The State Audit Office recommends that consideration be given to whether the quality and uniformity of measurements made by consultants could be improved by certifying consultants.

Another observation in the audit was that, within the framework of resources available for permit handling and control, the environment centres have given priority to permit handling. The applied charge policy is not aimed at achieving full resources for environmental permit activities. Environmental permit charges cover 50% of the own costs of activities on average. Businesses are not charged for the control of permits. The State Audit Office considers that a control charge in itself would be in line with the polluter

pays principle and that the Ministry of the Environment should consider both charges and their level as a whole.

According to the Environmental Protection Act and the Environmental Protection Decree which came into force in 2000, regional environment centres are responsible for the control of environmental permits granted by environmental permit authorities and also issue statements on these permit applications. In the view of the environment centres these statements include preparatory work for decisions. The environment centres have also considered it problematic that environmental permit handling and control is split between two authorities. On the other hand, environmental permit authorities regard it as their task to study the matter thoroughly without relying too much on the environment centre's statement. The State Audit Office has called for the Ministry of the Environment to investigate the division of preparatory work between authorities and to consider the splitting of charge revenues in a corresponding manner.