

REWETTING PEATLANDS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Buffer zones as a practical pathway for restoration

**Policy insights from Weerribben-Wieden for
scaling wetland restoration in intensive agricultural
landscapes**



CONTEXT AND CURRENT POLICY LANDSCAPE

The Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Quality and Nature (LNVN) coordinates the implementation of EU nature policies in the Netherlands, within the framework of the Environment and Planning Act (Omgevingswet, 2014). While national policy sets the direction, provincial governments are pri-

marily responsible for implementing nature legislation, particularly in protected areas and within the National Nature Network (NNN).

Wetland restoration unfolds in a context of **extreme land scarcity and highly intensive agriculture**, which limits the space available for rewetting. As a result, most inter-

ventions are confined to small areas adjacent to existing reserves. Larger-scale progress has been achieved mainly where rewetting aligns with water safety and climate adaptation priorities, such as in the “Room for the River” programme, stream valley restoration initiatives, and climate buffers like “De Onlanden”.

WHY IS RESTORATION HARD TO SCALE?

Barriers to effective wetland restoration

Land pressure

Housing, energy, agriculture, and nature compete for limited land.

Fragmented ownership

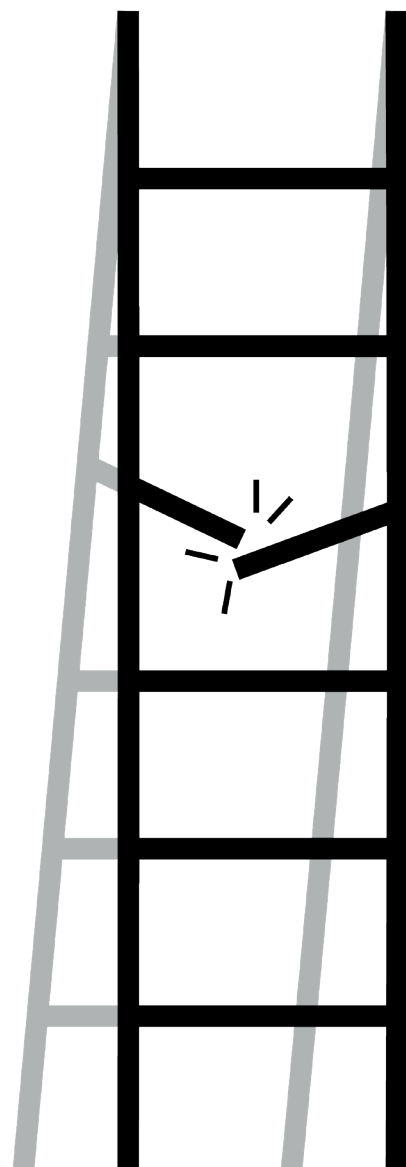
Multiple landowners make landscape-scale rewetting slow and complex.

Weak incentives

Voluntary schemes and subsidies have not delivered systemic change.

Policy implementation gaps

Weak implementation of water legislation affects restoration outcomes.



PRIORITY POLICY MEASURES

Buffer zones as a leverage point

Hydrologically effective buffer zones around wetlands, especially peatlands, can deliver multiple restoration benefits at once.

Protect small and vulnerable natural areas within intensive agricultural landscapes.



Reduces nutrient inflows



Improves water quality



Strengthens ecological resilience



Reduces droughts

EVIDENCE FROM PRACTICE

Weerribben-Wieden National Park

One of the largest lowland peatland systems in North-west Europe, Weerribben-Wieden shows how long-term commitment can drive successful restoration. Once degraded by drainage

and peat extraction, the area has been restored through sustained efforts supported by land acquisition, protected status, and EU funding.

Restoration focuses on rewetting

former agricultural grasslands in buffer zones, combining hydrological recovery with active nutrient removal through mowing, biomass harvesting, and targeted fertilisation to accelerate soil restoration.

Biodiversity impacts

The results confirm that:

- 1 Higher water levels ➔ higher biodiversity
- 2 Typical wetland species return under wetter conditions
- 3 Lower nutrients improve ecosystem quality



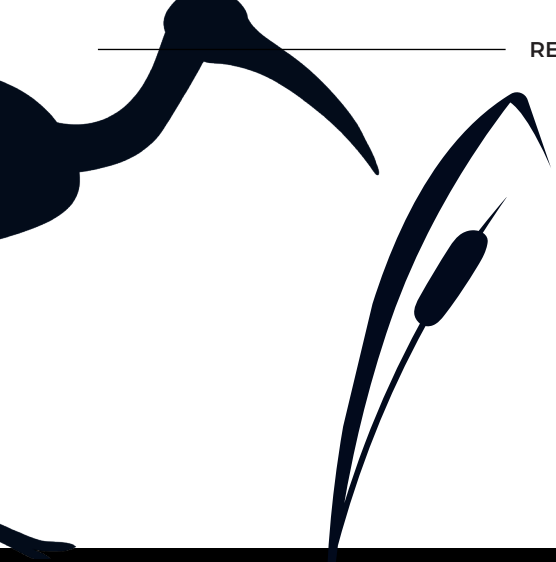
Trade-off:

Drainage ditches support biodiversity but increase methane emissions

Climate impacts

Rewetting significantly reduces CO₂ emissions :

- 1 Emissions lower than intensive agriculture
- 2 Higher than fully restored natural systems
- 3 Methane concentrated in open water



WHAT DOES THIS CASE SHOW?

Former agricultural grasslands can be successfully transformed into functioning wetland ecosystems. The combination of hydrological restoration with nutrient removal is key. Establishing effective buffer zones is essential not only to protect core peatland areas but also to reduce conflicts with surrounding land uses, which most often depend on deep drainage.

POLICY PROPOSALS

- 1 Transform surrounding land uses**
Convert surrounding grasslands into natural or semi-natural systems, supported by nature-friendly farming or paludiculture.
- 2 Set clear environmental rules**
Establish binding rules on water levels and nutrient management.
- 3 Support farmers fairly**
Provide viable economic alternatives and fair compensation.

HOW TO SCALE AND ACCELERATE WETLAND RESTORATION

Think bigger

- Move from plot-level ➔ landscape-scale
- Address hydrological root causes

Align priorities

- Link to water safety (strong political support)
- Involve water boards in nature management

Enable implementation

- Binding rules for buffer zones
- Integrate nature and water policies
- Strengthen stakeholder cooperation
- Support farmers with viable alternatives



rewet-he.eu/

 **info@rewet-he.eu**

 **@rewet_he**

 **rewet**

 **@rewet_he**



**Funded by
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or CINEA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.