

Audit of the management and supervision of measures against road noise

Federal Office for the Environment

Key facts

The Confederation contributes to the costs of the cantons for noise abatement and protection in the road sector. Global contributions are paid for *main roads* (a total of CHF 180 million per year, not only for noise abatement), while financial aid for *other roads* (approx. CHF 25 million per year) is regulated in programme agreements. The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) examined the Federal Office for the Environment's (FOEN) management and supervision in this area.

The results show that the FOEN does exert control, but that it is not sufficiently aligned with the objectives. The supervisory activities are not sufficiently risk-oriented, and there is no overarching supervisory concept. Finally, the office could collect additional data from the cantons in order to improve the overall view of the status of noise abatement measures.

Appropriate objectives defined, but management geared to costs

The aim of the programme agreements is to protect the population from road noise. This is congruent with the overarching policy objective. In order to objectively assess whether the objective has been achieved, the FOEN has defined a suitable indicator based on the number of newly protected persons. For each programme period, an agreement is concluded with every canton that sets a specific number of persons as a target value.

The federal contributions for programme agreements should be based on this target value. According to the legal framework, federal refund requests also depend on this target. In practice, however, cantonal costs are the basis for calculation in both cases. A focus on effectiveness would allow administrative simplifications and increase incentives for the cantons to take measures that are as cost-effective as possible.

The FOEN prioritises measures that reduce noise at the source over measures on the propagation path. The former generally offer a better cost-benefit ratio. The cantons are increasingly following this prioritisation, both for *main roads* and for *other roads*. However, there are still considerable differences between the cantons. It is important that the FOEN sets targeted incentives.

Uniform calculations that should be better documented

The programme agreements were originally limited until 2018. Approximately CHF 25 million were paid out annually up to this point. During the extension period, which is to expire in 2022, CHF 9 million will be distributed to the cantons each year. In May 2021, the Federal Council decided to continue the programme agreements indefinitely¹.

¹ "Federal Council approves ordinances in the environmental sector", Federal Council press release of 12 May 2021

Between 2012 and 2015, the Confederation reclaimed a total of around CHF 16 million from five cantons. Since 2016, the FOEN has been trying to prevent refund requests through dynamic financial planning. This optimises the use of available funds.

The calculations and refund requests audited by the SFAO were carried out in a uniform manner. However, the procedure is insufficiently documented, which means that there is a risk of a loss of knowledge in the event of a change or loss of personnel.

No overarching supervisory concept and insufficient focus on risk

The legal and FOEN-internal principles for supervision of the cantons with regard to programme agreements are very general. There is no supervisory concept for all of the office's agreements. However, such a concept is necessary in order to ensure that resources are used in a targeted and efficient manner through a risk-oriented approach.

The supervisory activities include monitoring, based on information from the cantons, spot checks and on-site visits. Contrary to the internal principles, the cantons are also involved in the random sampling. The selection is not based on a risk assessment. In addition, all cantons are audited in the same way, once per programme period, regardless of size and project scope. As a result, resources are not used efficiently.

The SFAO cannot conclusively assess the effectiveness of supervision due to inaccurate documentation. There is currently no cooperation with the cantonal supervisory organisations, although there would be particular potential for synergies in this area, for example with regard to the coordination of risks and the choice of samples.

Information on relief provided by the cantons should be collected

As the owners of roads, the cantons are legally obliged to implement noise abatement measures. However, if redevelopment would be disproportionately expensive or if other interests, such as the protection of local character, outweigh these, the cantons can grant relief. It is currently not known how many relief decisions are made each year across Switzerland.

The FOEN collects data from the cantons annually on the status of redevelopment and noise abatement measures. The data serves as a basis for publications and discussions as well as a calculation basis for federal contributions. It would be useful to supplement this overall view with information on the relief granted.

The collection of data is perceived by the cantons as complex and confusing. In addition, it results in additional work and creates risks with regard to data quality, as incorrect entries are possible. The FOEN has recognised this and is planning to replace the data collection system. Simplifications and improvements in data quality are to be considered at an early stage.

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