

Audit of the handling of contaminated sites

Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport

Key facts

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) conducted an audit at the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS) that focused on the handling of contaminated sites. The Cadastre of contaminated sites of the DDPS provides a nationwide overview of the sites that are within its area of enforcement and are considered to be contaminated without harmful effects or nuisances under the Contaminated Sites Ordinance (CSO), or for which an investigation must be carried out to determine whether they are in need of monitoring or remediation.

The CSO entered into force on 26 August 1998. It does not contain a defined deadline for implementation. The Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) sets annual deadlines, based on the Federal Council's explanatory statement on the CSO. This states that the remediation of contaminated sites is to be realised in one to two generations, i.e. by 2040. The DDPS estimates the total investment for assessments, monitoring and remediation at several hundred million Swiss francs. Exact figures cannot be provided as some of the investigations are still pending. The territory and environment section of the General Secretariat of the DDPS (GS-DDPS) is responsible for implementing the CSO.

Within the scope of the audit, the SFAO found the greatest risks in the handling of underwater ammunition sites and the failure to set deadlines for implementing the CSO.

The necessary preliminary investigations could last until 2050

The Cadastre of contaminated sites is structured according to the requirements of the CSO. Progress in terms of processing can be seen in the number of remediations carried out. Investigations and remediations for firing range installations on land are well established and have been successfully tested in numerous cases.

The deadlines defined by the FOEN at the beginning of the 2000s to complete the necessary preliminary investigations by 2025, and the necessary remediations by 2040, are binding neither for the cantons nor for the federal enforcement authorities. These deadlines are linked to the Federal Council's explanatory statement on the CSO, which the FOEN believes should be understood as a declaration of intent. In autumn 2021, as part of the consultation on the revision of the Environmental Protection Act, deadlines¹ are to be established for the provision of funds for the remediation of contaminated sites via the CSRCO fund². However, these will not be binding for the DDPS either, as it cannot draw any money from the fund. According to the DDPS' order of priorities, the preliminary investigations could last until 2050 in some cases.

¹ 2028 for the completion of the necessary preliminary investigations and 2040 for the completion of the necessary remediations

² The Confederation contributes financially by means of a specially created fund, the CSRCO Contamination Fund, which is administered by the FOEN (see Ordinance on the Charge for the Remediation of Contaminated Sites of 26 September 2008).

The SFAO considered it essential that the GS-DDPS (territory and environment section) define measurable objectives and base the order of priorities for the preliminary investigation on them. To this end, the GS-DDPS can refer to the annual deadlines of the Federal Council's explanatory statement on the CSO, or set alternative goals. The order of priorities for the required investigations at contaminated sites must be adapted to the deadlines set.

Increased risk for the Confederation in handling underwater ammunition sites

The underwater ammunition sites pose an increased financial and reputational risk for the Confederation. According to the Cadastre of contaminated sites of the DDPS, none of these sites, regardless of whether storage or firing range, are considered to be in need of remediation under the CSO. However, the assessment of the underwater ammunition sites with regard to the legislation on contaminated sites, in particular the firing ranges in lakes, raises questions and must be reviewed in light of the application of the new FOEN implementation guide of 2020 "Contaminated sites and surface waters".

Furthermore, some assessments of underwater ammunition sites, such as the Air Force firing range in Forel on Lake Neuchâtel, are based on historical investigations that do not permit a clear risk assessment without a comprehensive technical investigation in accordance with the CSO. The SFAO suggested that these technical investigations should be carried out in order to analyse and better assess the risks of any remediation. The SFAO recommended that the GS-DDPS structure its risk management in such a way that the risks and their acceptance assessment are clearly comprehensible.

The DDPS' territory and environment section does not perform any obvious supervision and must introduce a reporting system

The DDPS' territory and environment section is responsible for the enforcement and supervision of the implementation of the CSO. The DDPS' territory and environment section exercises no further discernible supervision over the exemptions from the Cadastre of contaminated sites, the deadlines or the prioritisation of the required preliminary investigations under the CSO. It is not apparent whether or by whom this procedure was assessed and approved. These points are not set out in the risk description and are not mentioned in the reports. The SFAO did not investigate whether the higher-level management and steering bodies were aware of or supported the lack of recognisable supervision.

Previously, there was no reporting system on the part of the GS-DDPS, and neither the public nor the department's management were sufficiently and comprehensibly informed about the implementation of the CSO. Work is underway to remedy this. As the Federal Council has already proposed accepting the postulate³ on more transparent reporting, the SFAO refrained from making a recommendation in this area.

Original text in German

³ 21.3636 – Sites polluted by the army. What are the prospects for remediation? Hurni postulate, 3 June 2021