

Operation of hydrological measuring networks

Performance audit

Key facts

The Hydrology Division of the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) is responsible for the constant monitoring of bodies of water of national significance. It operates measuring networks that continually provide information on the qualitative and quantitative condition of the waters for that purpose. The production and dissemination of this water data are associated with annual costs of more than CHF 10 million.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) got a good impression of the quality of the services when checking the efficiency of the measuring networks. However, the audit found significant scope for optimisation regarding cooperation with partners within the Federal Administration and financial management of the division and/or office.

Considerable coordination burden because of many interfaces

In 2011, the FOEN outsourced the technical maintenance of the measuring networks to the Federal Institute of Metrology (METAS) because of personnel credit cuts and possible synergies. Now, four years later, it is apparent that, although METAS brings technical innovation to the measuring network, no savings are to be seen overall. This is due to the combination of costly projects to modernise the measuring network and the considerable coordination work between the FOEN and METAS caused by a form of cooperation with many interfaces.

The monitoring of the measuring network and indirectly also the validation of the measurement data take place at least partly in two locations. Moreover, the FOEN mandate does not currently cover all of the costs incurred in METAS, even though it contributes to the fixed costs.

Insufficient basis for the decision to outsource technical maintenance

Without doubting the meaningfulness of the cooperation between the FOEN and METAS, the SFAO wonders why other candidates within the Federal Administration were not evaluated. MeteoSuisse, for example, also operates a measuring network and offers significant synergies primarily in terms of IT infrastructure, as well as the collection of data and its validation, through to publication and archiving. The statutory performance mandates are very similar, and there is already cooperation in certain areas at present. It was first necessary to invest in IT and know-how at METAS when the mandate was taken on. The selection of another partner could possibly have generated even more synergies.

Inadequate management due to a lack of cost transparency

Financial information at the FOEN is often insufficient. The definition of the processes that exist at the office level is too rough to allow for efficient management at division level. Personnel costs – the most important financial input factor – are not allocated with detailed time recording for the individual cost centres and there are major gaps in the asset ledger, with the result that there are no figures



available showing the value of the measuring network, the cost of maintenance or the cost of individual services. Accordingly, it is difficult to establish indicators to assess performance or track optimisation successes. A key dimension, i.e. the costs for own provision of services, is missing from make or buy decisions, which also have to be made time and again within the FOEN.

IT problems and future cooperation potential

The FOEN has to decide whether it wants an equal partner in the sense of a data provider or a service provider on an order basis. This will both reduce the number of interfaces and end the parallel existence of certain IT tools. This decision is all the more necessary because the new measurement electronics developed by METAS to the specifications of the FOEN will be rolled out in 2016. Very careful attention has to be paid to ensure that no longer needed systems are shut down and that tasks are performed in only one place. The water information system WISKI that is under construction, with a cost ceiling of CHF 8.7 million, is likewise affected. For the SFAO, this raises the general question as to whether the system serves only genuine needs.

It is still unclear at the moment what role MeteoSwiss will play in the future in the hydrological measuring network. The SFAO firmly believes, however, that potential still exists. It has instructed the FOEN to prepare various cooperation options.

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