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The
**Value of
Rivers**

KEYNOTE SPEAKER



INGWER DE BOER

General Director, Rijkswaterstaat, Projectbureau Ruimte voor de Rivier

ROOM FOR THE RIVER, EXPERIENCES FROM THE NETHERLANDS

Living with Floods, Space for Water, Room for the River, and 'resilience' are frequently adopted as guiding principles and concepts in contemporary flood risk management policies in European countries. Climate change has become an additional incentive. This certainly holds true for The Netherlands. The wake-up call came in 1993 and 1995 when the rivers Meuse and Rhine almost flooded. A few years later, Katrina fed the debate in The Netherlands on the limitations of the ability to control extreme events by technical means alone. These events raised the awareness of the potential threat posed by the increased value of investments and population growth and provided incentives to reform the Dutch flood risk management policy.

The water levels in 1993 and 1995 were extremely high and the dikes just managed to hold. A quarter of a million people and one million cattle had to be evacuated. Extremely high river discharges will occur more frequently in the future and for this reason it was decided to ensure that the rivers could discharge the forecast greater volumes of water without flooding. The Government approved the Room for the River Program in 2006. This Program has three objectives:

- by 2015 the branches of the Rhine will cope with a discharge capacity of 16,000 cubic meters of water per second without flooding;
- the measures implemented to increase safety will also improve the overall environmental quality of the river region;
- the extra room the rivers will need in the coming decades to cope with higher discharges due to the forecast climate changes, will remain permanently available.

A range of measures is being implemented to create more room for the river and reduce high water levels, such as lowering the floodplains, relocating dikes further inland, lowering groynes in the rivers and deepening the summer beds. Strengthening dikes is a measure that will be implemented only when the alternatives are too expensive or inadequate. As such, Room for the River is taking a central role in the Netherlands in a transition of water management practice from “fighting against water” towards “living with water”. Room for the River is an example for future large scale water management infrastructure projects like the Delta Program that have to deal with complex interacting domains. Furthermore, its program organization that embraces governance of networks, whilst respecting representative democracy in delivery may provide a leading example for how the Dutch government can organize the delivery of public works in the future. The relevance of the Room for the River program stretches beyond our national borders, because similar transitions to more holistic and sustainable water management are taking place in other places in Europe and beyond.