

WRITTEN QUESTION P-1127/04
by Alexander de Roo (Verts/ALE)
to the Commission

Subject: Drilling for gas a significant threat to the Waddenzee

The Meijer Commission set up by the Netherlands Government (September 2003) claims that if natural gas were to be extracted from under the Dutch Waddenzee this would not have any significant impact on the natural environment there. However, experience suggests otherwise: gas extraction (since 1986) on Eastern Ameland has caused the land there to subside at a rate of 1.5 cm per annum. It is the same picture with natural gas extraction in the Province of Groningen, where the land has subsided by 30, 40 and in some cases as much as 50 cm in relation to its level when gas extraction began some 35 years ago. (Source: Energieverslag Nederland [Netherlands Energy Report], 1998).

In addition, the rising sea level poses a serious threat to the unique natural environment of the Waddenzee and Frisian Islands. Recent calculations indicate that 10-20% (with moderate or extreme climate change) will be lost in the next 50 years. In some places, the loss is likely to be as much as 30-40%. Any fresh gas drilling in the Waddenzee would create a severe additional threat.

1. Drilling for gas could be a significant threat to the natural environment in the Waddenzee. There is a danger that the mudflats and saltmarshes will be destroyed as a result of the anticipated subsidence of the bed of the Waddenzee due to fresh gas drilling. This will not be significant over a period of 5 years, during which the seabed might subside by 5 cm, but in the medium term it will be. The European directives on wild birds and habitats say nothing about the time factor. Is the conclusion justified that a threat which will only become significant after a number of years qualifies as a significant threat just as much as one which has an immediate significant impact on nature?

2. In the interests of the unique natural assets of the Waddenzee, the most important natural area in the Netherlands, I would ask the Commission to consider this matter seriously and to draw attention to possible violations of EU law during the regular consultations with the Netherlands Government on the implementation of the directives on wild birds and habitats. Will the Commission for once not wait until the Netherlands Government takes a decision on extracting gas from under the Waddenzee but immediately express a view on a possible significant breach of the EU's nature conservancy legislation due to subsidence of the seabed/land which would be caused by any drilling for gas?