

The Office of the Auditor General's investigation of sustainable land-use planning and land use in Norway

Summary

The land use in Norway is in several areas at variance with the objectives of the Norwegian parliament (the Storting) concerning sustainable land use. The coastal zone, the zones adjoining watercourses, regions above the tree line and extensive areas of untouched nature are still being downscaled. The building of holiday homes is increasing substantially in the mountain areas, and access to the coastal zone is being reduced. The current downscaling has consequences for important assets such as outdoor recreation, cultural heritage and cultural environments, cultivated soil, and biological diversity. The development does not adequately promote eco-friendly land use in towns and urban settlements.

These are some of the main conclusions in *The Office of the Auditor General's investigation of sustainable land-use planning and land use in Norway*, Document no. 3:11 (2006–2007), which was submitted to the Storting on 3 July.

The investigation shows that large areas of untouched nature are still being reduced in size as a result of road building, other major technical infrastructure developments and the construction of buildings – primarily holiday homes. This means that the value of these areas for outdoor recreation and experiencing nature and as biotopes for several species is being diminished. Building above the tree line and in tree-line areas increased by approximately 25 per cent from 1985 to 2005.

Building in the coastal zone does not appear to be decreasing. In some counties the building activity in such areas has been higher since 1995 than it was in the period 1985–1995. In the southern part of Norway more than half of the mainland coastline is currently less than 100 metres from a building, which contributes to reducing accessibility for the general public.

The development pattern in towns and urban settlements is resulting in increasingly larger areas being appropriated while at the same time too few provisions are being made to reduce the use of private cars. Pollution in towns and urban settlements is still a problem, and vehicles are responsible for a large proportion of the emissions. The emission of greenhouse gases has increased by 13 per cent since 1991. Local air pollution remains a problem in most of the larger towns, and noise irritation resulting from road traffic continues to grow.

At the beginning of 2007 it is difficult to acquire national and regional overviews of land-use and land-use planning in the municipalities. This is partly due to the inadequate collation of uniform and nationwide information in this area. The Ministry of the Environment does not have procedures for the systematic processing of the information that it has collected at any given time; neither has a total evaluation of the functioning of the planning system in Norway been initiated.

Cross-sector planning constitutes a challenge – for instance because of conflicting objectives among the various sectors. The different sectors also have varying practices for handling individual cases, either pursuant to the Planning and Building Act or according to specific

sector legislation. The Office of the Auditor General (OAG) points out that conflicting objectives and the use of policy instruments should be clarified to a greater extent at national level to make the frameworks clearer and easier for regional and local government administration to deal with.

Some municipalities do not draw up the land-use part of the municipal master plan as prescribed by law. The municipalities that have compiled such plans have not designed them well enough to ensure that they guarantee a comprehensive and long-term development that is in line with the national objectives. The investigation also shows that land use is too much at variance with the municipal master plan – zoning plans are approved and dispensations given contrary to the land-use part of the municipal master plan. The OAG points out that the Ministry of the Environment has the main responsibility for ensuring that the county authorities and the municipalities are able to carry out their tasks – for example by defining aims and providing guidance, advice and instructions on the planning work. The investigation shows that the municipalities have a considerable need for assistance.

The Ministry of the Environment agrees that extensive government efforts are required to ensure that municipal and regional planning promotes long-term sustainable land use. The Ministry emphasises that it is particularly important to encourage planning that contributes to reducing the emission of greenhouse gases, to improving the urban environment, to safeguarding the coastal zone and watercourses, to maintaining a uniform mountain policy and to increasing value creation based on the preservation of the natural environment and of cultural and landscape assets.