

Reports on the environmental quality objectives – too much and too little

Summary

The Swedish National Audit Office (Riksrevisionen) has studied whether reports on the follow-up of the 15 national environmental quality objectives correspond to the guidelines resulting from the decision reached by the Swedish Parliament in 2001 on the Government bill: Swedish environmental objectives – sub-goals and action strategies.

The follow-up reports on the environmental quality objectives are intended to provide data on which Parliament can reach standpoints on the environmental policy. The Parliament's decisions and the Government's ambitions have the effect that the requirements for information on the follow-up of environmental objectives have been set at a high level.

The study has focused on the Government's reports to Parliament and on the data for the reports that the Government receives through the follow up of the environmental quality objectives.

In order to assess this, Riksrevisionen has studied the reports and the data used to produce the reports. The Government's annual report to Parliament has been examined. Furthermore, information provided by the Swedish Environmental Objectives Council has been studied: both the Council's annual reports and its first evaluation report.

Conclusions

Riksrevisionen has found that, in certain important respects, the reports do not correspond to the guidelines that formed the basis of the decision made by Parliament. It is difficult to obtain an overall view from the reports and they have shortcomings which make them difficult to interpret. Important parts of the requested reports are lacking. Below Riksrevisionen summarises its conclusions on the extent to which the reports have corresponded to the stipulated guidelines.

Guidelines for reports

Riksrevisionen's conclusions

1. Identify the most important driving forces behind the environmental problems and the causes of these problems.	The driving forces behind the environmental problems and the causes of these problems are not described to a sufficient extent in the Environmental Objectives Council's reports or in the budget bill.
2. Describe how, and when, we will approach the objectives and whether the pace is sufficient to achieve the objectives within the stipulated time.	The reports show whether we will approach the objectives within the stipulated time. In addition, the budget bill presents how: i.e. the inputs that will lead us closer to the objectives. On the other hand, the reports do not specify the programmes that have the greatest

	effects for achieving the objectives.
3. Provide data for scenarios and forecasts.	The reports do not provide adequate data to produce scenarios and forecasts.
4. Provide data for the assessment of whether further measures are needed in order to achieve the objectives by the stipulated time, and whether the environmental quality objectives, sub-goals and directives need to be reviewed, for example in the light of economic and budgetary effects.	The reports provide data for assessments of whether further measures are needed. The reports also present proposals for changes to the objectives. On the other hand, to a large extent there is a lack of estimates of economic and budgetary effects. In the Environmental Objectives Council's evaluation report, reference is made to certain reports in which some of these effects are described for individual measures. There is no overall description of measures and costs of achieving the environmental quality objectives.
5. Provide data for cost estimates of measures	The report from the Environmental Objectives Council does not provide adequate data to make cost estimates of the measures. Cost estimates of this type should also form the basis of descriptions of conflicts between objectives, which was a specific responsibility for the Environmental Objectives Council in the sub-goals bill.

In the opinion of Riksrevisionen, the failure of the reports to fully follow the guidelines that formed the basis of Parliament's decisions can be partly due to the ways in which the reports and follow-up have been organised. This is the case, for example, in respect of the general division of responsibilities and the position of the Environmental Objectives Council. The Environmental Objectives Council has been established to follow up and report on the environmental quality objectives. At the same time, the guidelines for the reports require that information on the environment is combined with information from other sectors. This is the case, for example, in respect of the driving forces behind the environmental problems, descriptions of costs, and conflicts between the environmental quality objectives and other social objectives approved by Parliament.

Recommendations

Riksrevisionen's overall assessment is that reports on the follow-up of the environmental quality objectives probably fail to provide the overview requested by the Government and Parliament. There is a need to improve the reports, for example in respect of their lucidity, of estimates of budgetary and economic consequences of different measures, and of descriptions of possible conflicts between the environmental quality objectives and other social objectives approved by Parliament.

Most of Riksrevisionen's recommendations refer to measures that should be considered by the Government, but certain aspects concern the Environmental Objectives Council more directly.

To make it possible for the reports to provide the information requested, the Government should consider taking action to

- clearly define the duties of the Environmental Objectives Council, for example in respect of the content of reports,
- specify the requirements for reports from government agencies in their annual directives and instructions, particularly in respect of costs and impact assessments,
- better adapt the position and actual possibilities available to the Environmental Objectives Council to coordinate reports to the Council,
- ensure that any conflicts between the environmental quality objectives and other social objectives approved by Parliament are comprehensively described.

In order to improve reports on the follow-up of the environmental quality objectives, the Environmental Objectives Council should

- take action to improve the lucidity of the information it provides and to describe the driving forces and causes of the environmental problems in a uniform manner,
- produce proposals for systems and routines that are necessary to enable the Council to give the same message in different reports,
- as far as possible take advantage of and compile existing data from different sources in order to shed light on costs and on conflicts between objectives.