Is risk based land management really sustainable?

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All Risk based land management has been seen in the last decade as the politically correct way of thinking in Europe for managing contaminated land. The multi-functional approach is now considered as a blasphemous word! It sounds like a middle-age approach for contaminated land. But is it really so that Risk based clean-up is really the way to go? Is it really sustainable? Haven't we forgotten why the "polluter pays" principle is now completely forgotten in soil remediation policies? Are we all impaired in our ability to think critically?

Someone who received a piece of land as natural terrain, used it and contaminated it should now only make sure that land does not present a severe risk, based on its future use. That means the restrictions in land use are a burden and a liability carried by the next generation. Is that really sustainable?

Multi-functionality, the initial principle behind soil remediation policies in the Netherlands has been modified to go to Risk Based land management only because the costs of reaching natural levels after clean-up were unsustainable. It is a second choice solution, and therefore a rather poor solution forced by economic realities. Those economic realities are a given and it is obvious that they are a major constraint that needs to be taken into account.

However, today, it is time to ring an alarm bell since policy principles are no longer in line with the initial, logical and sustainable approach: "The polluter pays", and if that implies excessive costs, then, and only then, he needs to take measures to reduce the risk, based on the future use of the land. Those corrective actions should not release him from any future liability with regard to residual pollution left at the site.

Risk based land management has become a goal on its own, and the consequences of this shift are seriously impairing the sustainability of the whole approach. Most soil policies forget about the first part (the pollute pays). They go directly to risk based, even when multi-functional could be applied at a reasonable cost!

Research institutions, combined with remediation companies, have no longer any incentive to search for innovative technologies which can treat soil down to background levels, at acceptable costs, and thereby offering the tools to apply the multi-functionality principle (and consequently truly applying the 'polluter pays' principle), without excessive economic consequences. New technology research is in

a vast majority, focused on bio-remediation and associated types of technologies, as a consequence of that policy choice. Those techniques are driven by the risk based land management principles, since they won't bring the soil back to natural levels, but reduce its contamination and subsequent risk to an acceptable level for the planned use. Policy targets should be changed radically to incentivise research institutions and remediation companies to innovate in technologies able to reach natural levels at acceptable costs.

Most financial actors are concerned about the residual pollution and its long-term liability. As critical actors in land transactions, their role should not be neglected while drafting policies.

Policies should also reward the multi-functional clean-up for its real sustainability. Most of European soil policies do not address the long-term liability of remaining pollutants in the soil. Therefore, no clear financial impact of this liability is defined, and there is no incentive to eliminate it. By not addressing this issue, we behave like ostriches, hiding our head in the sand!