

30 March 2015

## **Remarks by the Auditor General Mr. Alar Karis about the audit report "Activities of State in Guaranteeing Preservation of Semi-natural Biotic Communities":**

The principle - when the states expects its citizens to perform an obligation, it must act as an example - is topical also in the light of this audit, which focuses on the preservation and maintenance of semi-natural biotic communities in protected areas. These areas are meadows and pastures valuable in terms of nature conservation, which are also the homes of plant and animal species unique to them and which need consistent maintenance - mowing and herding - for the preservation of suitable conditions. 40 million euros, mostly funds received from the European Union, has been invested in the maintenance and restoration of biotic communities and the establishment of the necessary infrastructure from 2007-2013, as maintaining these communities without support is not cost-effective. The number of areas that were actually maintained was three times lower than planned for 2013. And the quality of maintenance works, i.e. the achievement of the actual maintenance goal, was a problem in several areas that were maintained.

A significant number of semi-natural biotic communities that have not been maintained are protected areas that belong to the state itself, whereby we expect the goals of nature conservation to be achieved as a priority. Whilst the person or citizen responsible for an obligation assigned to citizens is clearly identifiable, the performance of the state's obligations often seems to be nobody's concern. State authorities don't often consider themselves responsible for the performance of specific duties and getting things done and find that their 'statutory obligation' is to coordinate and organise the performance of such duties. Responsibility just floats away.

This is exactly what we see when we look at the maintenance of state-owned semi-natural biotic communities. Organisation of maintenance in areas belonging to the state is a duty of two authorities - the Environmental Board and the State Forest Management Centre. Both of them are great organisers, but it's not clear which of them is responsible for the results.

Since the semi-natural biotic communities located on state-owned land are maintained primarily with the support received from the EU, then organising mostly entails renting the state's land to an interested person, who will then apply for EU support for land maintenance from the state, then pass part of the money back to the state as rent and land tax, and also cover the expenses of maintaining the land. Problems arise when nobody wants to take a state-owned semi-natural biotic community on rent. In such cases, neither the Environmental Board nor the State Forest Management Centre consider it their duty to perform the necessary works. There doesn't seem to be any money for this purpose in the specific authority's budget and if the authority itself wanted to use EU funds for the maintenance, it would have to change the rules a bit and make an effort itself. Wouldn't it therefore make sense to assign the responsibility for the maintenance of state-owned biotic communities in such cases to just one authority, e.g. the State Forest Management Centre?

Unfortunately, maintaining semi-natural biotic communities is not the only duty in the state of Estonia whereby state authorities reckon that their responsibility borders on just coordination and organisation. However, that's not enough. Things must get done. Or if it's too much, maybe the state should consider whether it has overdone it with the requirements, obligations and plans.