

# OLOF VAN DER GAAG, DIRECTOR NVDE

**NO MORE ROOM FOR PROCRASTINATION: THE NETHERLANDS NEEDS TO SWITCH TO A MORE SUSTAINABLE ENERGY SYSTEM AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. A CLIMATE AGREEMENT ON HOW THIS SHOULD BE ACHIEVED, IS CURRENTLY BEING NEGOTIATED. "EVERYONE UNDERSTANDS SOMETHING SHOULD BE DONE — NOW."**

JAAP MEIJERS



WTIV AEOLUS ON ITS WAY TO GEMINI OFFSHORE WIND FARM, PHOTO: GEMINI



PHOTO BY MILAN VERMEULEN

Sustainable energy has been a topic of debate in this country for decades, without really achieving all that much. The first attempt to actually make a change, was the National Energy Agreement ('Energieakkoord') in 2013. Government, companies and environmental organisations agreed to increase the renewable energy share to 14 percent in 2020 and reduce power consumption by 100 petajoules.

In early March negotiations for a new climate agreement ("Klimaataakkoord") started. It won't contain targets for a larger share of renewable energy, nor for energy saving. The idea is mainly to delineate how to bring carbon emissions down by 49 percent by 2030 compared to 1990 emissions.

The negotiations are quite a complicated process. Five sector bodies are created, each representing an industry sector, being electricity, built environment, mobility, industry and agriculture and land use. But there are also at least fifty sub-bodies and sub-sub-bodies plus an overarching climate board, headed by Ed Nijpels.

The companies that are involved in making our energy system more sustainable are represented by the Dutch Renewable Energy Foundation (NVDE). Over a thousand companies have joined the NVDE to work toward 100% renewable energy. Among its members are companies in the electricity sector such as Eneco, Siemens, transmission system operator TenneT, Tesla and fast charge network Fastned, but also heating companies such as suppliers of biomass boilers. NVDE director Olof van der Gaag will be seated at many of the different 'table' discussions.

**WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM THE KLIMAATAAKKOORD? ARE WE STILL IN TIME?**

"There are two sides really. Climate change can no longer be relegated to our grandchildren's generation. It's here now and it is our responsibility. Heavy rainfall and flooding occur more frequently. We should have been doing this twenty years earlier, because now we have to force an unnatural

rate of change. Take for instance natural gas-free houses. Until last year, it was normal procedure to annually add 50 to 60 thousand houses that are connected to natural gas. This means we would now start to get houses off natural gas at a rate of a thousand houses each day up to 2050. It would have been very nice if those numbers weren't quite as high.

But then again, there's more support than ever for really doing something about it. Increasing the share of renewable energy from 4 percent to 16 percent in just ten years isn't enough by a long shot, but at least something is happening. The fact that, as a result of the Energieakkoord, five coal plants were shut down and replaced by wind farms, is really showing in the statistics. If we actually manage to cut our carbon emissions by half by 2030, then it is another step forward. Yet it is still a long time away. Last year carbon emissions increased again and another five coal plants remain operational. Those should be shut down within the next ten years."

**IS THE SENSE OF URGENCY SHARED BY THE GOVERNMENT AND OTHER PARTIES IN THE KLIMAATAAKKOORD?**

"The mood has really changed from what it was ten years ago. Back then nobody really cared, and now everyone is aware something should be done now. It will get more tense though, I think, once the bill is presented. We'll get to that phase in a week or two. Even if the costs for many solutions are coming down, on average it's still more expensive to switch to renewable energy instead of just continue burning fossil fuels. Opinions differ, of course, on how those expenditures should be distributed. The minister for Economic Affairs and Climate, Eric Wiebes, has told each sector how many megatons carbon dioxide they should reduce. The industry in principle is fine with everything as long as it is subsidized by the government. However, the government thinks 'we have to be able to explain this to the tax payer, so they should pay for it themselves'. And it's a couple of billion Euros a year, not something one can spirit away."

**THE NETHERLANDS ISN'T QUITE THE IDEAL PLACE FOR ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF ENERGY. THERE ARE NO RESERVOIRS, AND IN WINTER SOLAR PANELS ARE NOT OF MUCH USE. IS OFFSHORE WIND THE ONLY REAL OPTION FOR OUR COUNTRY TO GENERATE RENEWABLE ENERGY?**

"On the score of wind power at sea, the Energieakkoord has caused quite a breakthrough. Many new wind turbines are being added, even without subsidies. The Netherlands wasn't given all that many gifts by Mother Earth, but the North Sea sure is one of them. The sea floor is very shallow, so it's easy to drive in piles, and the winds are quite strong. >>



I notice a lot of enthusiasm to continue that flagship of the Energieakkoord, many parties are in favour. To large utilities offshore wind farms are a comfortable scale of thinking, because they are large, centralized projects which power a million households in one go. Some parts of the energy transition are a challenge for the old economy, all that mucking about with decentralized citizens who generate power themselves, but wind at sea still fits the large scale logic of the old energy supply."

**IF WE HAVE TO GET OFF FOSSIL FUELS THAT FAST, SHOULDN'T WE BUILD OFFSHORE WIND FARMS MORE QUICKLY AND ALSO MUCH LARGER?**

"The Government wants wind power to increase by 1 gigawatts per year. For the Netherlands, that's an unprecedented revolution. There is even discussion whether we can do even more. I do think there's room for more, 2 gigawatts per year would be possible too if you ask me. But I don't think the wind farm areas should be larger. A 700 megawatt area for instance already involves an investment of a couple of billion Euros. Suppose we start making 5 gigawatt lots, then you may be talking about twenty billion. If you consider the companies that can handle that level of investments, then maybe the only competitors will be Shell, Shell or Shell. That's not much of a competition. I think it is important that even smaller companies can fully participate."

**IS A MIX OF ONLY RENEWABLE ENERGY POSSIBLE, ONE THAT DOES NOT REQUIRE FOSSIL FUEL PLANTS AS BACKUP AT ALL?**

"The goal of our organization is 100 percent renewable energy, not just for electricity but also heating and transport. I think that's achievable. Electricity is the easiest part, because wind and solar already get us quite far. The only thing that will still have to be taken care of is peak power, to have a backup which can be activated at the press of a button. In the short term this can only be achieved sustainably by biomass, but that has its downsides. For now peak power will have to come from gas plants. Coal plants have to go, obviously. Gas plants are also easier to switch on than coal plants. It takes a coal power plant at least four hours to really get fired up, while a gas plant works just like your burner at home: light it and it works. Batteries are even faster. Tesla just built a backup facility in Australia using batteries. I expect we'll see that here too."

**BUT THE TALKING AND CONSULTING AT ALL THESE TABLES, DO WE REALLY HAVE TIME FOR ALL THAT? SHOULDN'T WE JUST ACT NOW IF WE ARE TO ACHIEVE THOSE TARGETS?**

"By nature I am not terribly patient myself, but this kind of societal transformation cannot be forced on a country. That's not how the Netherlands works. It's one thing to say 'do something instead of talking', but really, what then? We don't have a Great Beloved Leader who can make all decisions, and that's for the best. Jan Rotmans for instance [professor in sustainability and transitions] often says things like that, by which he means 'you should do what I want'. But he is not our Kim Jong-un. We all have to agree on this. We started in March, and the last meeting is on July 6. It really is an unprecedented change, halving carbon emissions in the Netherlands with a price tag of about four billion per year. If an agreement can be reached on that within four months, I think Ed Nijpels and Eric Wiebes can be quite pleased."

**CV**

Olof van der Gaag is director of the Dutch Renewable Energy Foundation (NVDE), which unites over a thousand companies in the goal to achieve 100% renewable energy. Before 2016 Van der Gaag was head of campaigns for environmental NGO Natuur en Milieu. Between 1998 and 2007 he was political adviser to the Dutch green party's fraction in parliament. Van der Gaag studied cultural anthropology.

**TECHNICIANS NEEDED**

"The Netherlands will have to start cherishing their technicians. Certainly at the level of vocational education a lot more technicians are needed, and we are not seeing more influx at all. That could turn out to be one of the biggest hurdles in the energy transition."

We need to show young people that a technical profession is very interesting and rewarding. Engineering talents tell me that new forms of energy to them are a lot more exciting and challenging. Drilling pipes into the ground is complex as well, but we have been doing that for ages, while here a lot of new problems need to be solved."



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