

# The reform of the inland waterways of France spreads worry along the canals.

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REPORT

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To double the share of the inland waterway freight, a new agency will favour the major waterways.

## A NETWORK OF 8.500 KMS

**6,100** kms of rivers and canals, out of a total of 8,500 kms, are managed by 'Voies Navigables de France' (VNF).

**1,868 kms** of inland waterways can accommodate the largest boats of more than 1,500 tons.

**40,000 hectares** of public property are managed by VNF: the largest

estate after that of the army and the French rail network.

**56.1 million tons** of goods were transported by inland waterway freight in 2009.

**120 HGVs** are necessary to replace a boat of 3,000 tons. A Freycinet barge (350 tons) replaces 14 of them.

On the Higher Scarpe Canal, a few metres downstream of the lock at Biache-Saint-Vaast, a small Pas-de-Calais town, four swans swim peacefully. They benefit from autumn's softness and from the calm of this canal, which connects Douai and its extensive river system to Arras.

On the quay, in front of the lock cottage, Olivier Senez is not calm. Manager of the Douai division, which is responsible for 44 kilometres of canal, of which 23 are small gauge, this 51 year old man draws a dark picture of the trade and its future: "There are fewer and fewer people, not enough human and financial resources and the canals and locks are deteriorating." For 31 years, he has been a faithful employee, in the service of the navigation which depends on the Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development, Transport and Housing.

At the end of August, the minister Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet presented a plan for reform to the government. The objective is to create, by January 1st, 2013, a new public corporation, the National Agency of Inland Waterways, which would gather under the same authority the 400 non public sector salaried employees of VNF, which celebrates twenty years this year, and the 4.500 civil servants of the navigation service. The Senate started discussion of the Bill on Wednesday October 19th.

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Amongst the workers, there is grave concern about the change of status and a possible loss of advantages. Their fear is also that the public service mission is being abandoned and that the new agency is concerned only with large waterways, at the expense of the small canals.

In spring, called out by all the trade unions, the staff went on strike for two days. Marc Papinutti, managing director of VNF, recognizes that "it is stressful for people". To avoid the problems caused by abrupt changes, as at the National Office of Forests (ONF), at employment centres or at France Telecom, a social survey was ordered.

In a mailing sent to each one of the workers, dated August 31st, Mrs. Kosciusko-Morizet means to be reassuring: there will be a "guarantee of payment" and "no imposed relocation ". Public status would be maintained for the civil servants, at least initially. But, at the ministry, the message is clear: "Only one person in charge is needed, a single command for looking after the waterways", explains an adviser.

In front of his canal, Olivier Senez has doubts. A maximum of ten boats per month go through" his" lock. In summer, a little river tourism livens the days, especially with the English and the Dutch.

Everything is automatic, he laments "One lock keeper remains where there were nine of them before. Even the large canals are automated, with locks worked remotely and monitored by camera". The risk of accident and of pollution requires a constant human presence, according to him.

Joseph Garrec, inspector of works, 57 years old, of which thirty-two have been with the inland waterways, also thinks that all the canals and banks are deteriorating. Built in the 1960s for the iron and steel industry in order to connect the blast furnaces of Dunkirk and Belgium, the waterways of Northern France are deteriorating. On the banks of the Deule canal, designed for large boats of 3,000 tons, Mr. Garrec shows collapsed banks. "Pruning, cleaning of banks, masonry work, is all done with subcontractors, he says. But the funds are not forthcoming and the vegetation takes over again.

More serious, according to the trade unions, is that the essential function of water management would no longer be assured with the same effectiveness. "With priority given to the passage of large boats, if there is not enough water, will we choose between agriculture drawing water from the canal, or transport?", asks Jean Hedou, secretary of the FO.

The workers know better than anyone the whims of water and being able to manage them. "We know that if it rains heavily on Arras, we can have a rise in

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water levels two hours later at Biache”, explains Olivier Senez. By cutting the small canals in sections, by entrusting the management to local government agencies, we lose coherence and our capacity for intervention.”

The same report is made by Fabienne Choeur, 56 years old, in charge of the navigation police and CGT official. "The transfer, in 2005, of the "small waterways" to the regions, on a voluntary basis, is partly responsible for the degradation", she says.

Today, the regions still remain doubtful. For the vice-president of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais in charge of transport, Alain Wacheux (PS), "VNF must continue its action and preserve its role, the local government agencies seldom having the capacity to ensure alone the bringing up to standard and the maintenance of secondary, in general rather dilapidated, canals. "

The government however shows its commitment to waterways transport and quotes the objective of reducing the weight of road freight, taken at the time of Grenelle Environment Round Table. The share of waterway freight altogether is less than 4%, even if its volume increases each year. "The objective is to double this share” says Francis Grignon, UMP (Bas-Rhin) senator and reporter of the bill.

But, to compete seriously with the lorry driver and to increase freight on the major waterways, "it is necessary to maintain the small canals used by the Freycinet barges, boats of 350 tons which each replace between 12 and 14 lorries" , replies Annie Cailliez, the president of the National Chamber of Inland Waterway Transport for the Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

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