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Opening speech: European water conference

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

World Water Day

Brussels, 22th March 2007

Minister Gabriel, Minister Nunes Correia, Members of the European Parliament, Commissioner Fischer Boel,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A warm welcome to the 2007 European Water Conference to all of you here today, both in person and through Internet.

The importance of water can never be stressed enough. This is why the Commission has deliberately chosen World Water Day, which we are all celebrating today, to talk about the protection of our waters. It is a perfect opportunity to exchange views and ideas not only about what is happening in the European Union, but also in the wider world. There are in fact other regions that face similar or even more severe problems.

In just a few days, we will all celebrate 50 years since the signature of the Treaties of Rome. During these fifty years, European integration has brought us peace, freedom, security and prosperity. Thanks to this, we, the citizens of the European Union, enjoy a better and richer quality of life. Environmental protection is a key cornerstone of all this, it certainly is one of the most successful outcomes.

Water protection is a prime example of the added value that the European Union can bring to its citizens. Thirty years ago, in the 1970s, the Rhine and many other European rivers had become so heavily polluted that salmon and other fish had disappeared. Beaches and coastal waters were too dirty to enjoy swimming. Drinking water was of questionable quality and its level of pollution was so overwhelming that it had become very expensive to clean it.

Moreover, severe catastrophes related to water have occurred over the years. We tend to forget unpleasant situations and events. But, if you try to think back to the Sandoz accident of 1986, to the mining waste spill of Baia Mare of 2000 and to the tragic floods of 2002, 2005 and 2006 in many parts of Europe, I am sure that you will remember. Think of what you felt at that time.

The European Union has taken up its responsibilities and has acted to address these problems. Since its inception in the Seventies, EU water policy has yielded tangible results. Urban wastewater has now been cleaned up in many places. Pollution of rivers and lakes from industry and households has been reduced dramatically. More than 90% of bathing water sites now meet quality standards. And fish have returned to some of those that were the dirtiest rivers.

But much more needs to be done. The world is constantly changing and new challenges are surfacing. The European Union must be prepared to address all this.

If we do not act timely and the predictions of the climate experts happen in their most dramatic form, it is likely that, in the coming months and years, we will be faced with an increasing number of floods and droughts. It is in addition expected that climate change will have an effect on the water cycle and biodiversity.

To tackle these challenges, the European Union has started already in the Nineties the development of a policy based on sustainable water management. This approach is encapsulated in one piece of legislation known as the Water Framework Directive.

This Directive is based on a number of key principles :

- First, it is *holistic*, because it looks at the water system as a whole. It includes groundwater, surface water and marine water in a co-ordinated way to enhance synergies and avoid duplications.
- Secondly, it applies the *integrated* approach, because it aims to identify links with other policies, like maritime, agriculture, and land use planning, to name but a few.
- Thirdly, it is *transparent*, because public participation is one of its central features. To be successful, a wider support is in fact needed.
- Fourthly, it follows *economic* principles, because it seeks to promote the efficient use of water through proper pricing policies.
- And finally, it is *ecological*, because its core binding target is the “good ecological status”, a true indicator of the health of the ecosystem and its biodiversity.

The Water Framework Directive was only the first step in advancing and modernising the water policy of the European Union. Since its adoption, it has been joined by other legislative acts such as the Directive on the Protection of Groundwater, a resource which is at the core of the drinking water supply in many Member States.

The proposal recently adopted by the Commission to set environmental quality standards for surface waters is another aspect of this on-going process. I take this opportunity to call on the Council and the European Parliament to finalise the review of this proposal as soon as possible. It constitutes an essential element for Member States to allow them to devise proper river basin management plans by 2009.

Much more is in the pipeline as the scope of water management will also have to be expanded. Directives in the areas of flood management and the marine environment are presently being discussed by the legislators and are key cornerstones of the EU's holistic and integrated approach to water policy.

Our water policy has matured over the last few decades. Soon we will have a framework in place for the foreseeable future.

Proper implementation is now the key to success. Only with full and appropriate implementation can we harvest the fruits of what we have planted. Failure to deliver will only increase the disappointment and frustration of European citizens and damage in a possible irreversible way the quality of our water. As "water is life", such an occurrence would be devastating.

This is why the European Commission is watching closely the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. The latest implementation report is being adopted today. It highlights many positive developments. It shows that nearly all 27 Member States of the European Union have transposed the Directive and that most have submitted their progress reports on time.

Talking about implementation, I would like to highlight the achievements made by one river basin, the Danube, as it is a striking example of how much good co-operation and vision could bring. The fact that 13 countries, not all of them members of the European Union, are successfully implementing the Directive is remarkable. I congratulate them for their success. And I am very pleased that Ms Varga, the current President of the Danube Commission, is here to tell us about these achievements in more detail.

Cross-border cooperation has proved a key to success in the Danube. This is an essential feature for many other river basins as more than 60% of the river basins in the European Union are trans-boundary.

Beside success stories like the one of the Danube, there are unfortunately also a number of shortcomings related to implementation. Some of these have been the basis for certain infringement procedures against some Member States.

The most significant of these shortcomings is the poor transposition of the Water Framework Directive into national legislation. The preliminary assessment made by the Commission has found that at least 19 Member States will have to re-work their national laws to make them in conformity with the Directive. This is especially true in relation to the obligations of the Directive that transfer rights to individuals and which will allow them access to justice.

Another important problem concerns the incorporation of economic instruments into water management. Most Member States have not identified the prices charged for water. Those Member States that have been working in this area have found interesting aspects. They have for example identified that the levels of cost recovery for agriculture are far lower than those for households and industries. Some Member States will also have to review their definition of water services.

It is clear that situations of this kind weaken the Water Framework Directive. Water is fast becoming a scarce resource. We must make sure that all users use water as efficiently as possible.

The Commission is particularly concerned about the rate of implementation of the Water Framework Directive in certain Member States¹. I call on the governments of these Member States to demonstrate to their citizens that efforts are made in order to get results and to provide water of a better quality.

I encourage all Member States to overcome the current shortcomings in the implementation of all water-related directives, especially those on urban wastewater treatment, nitrate pollution from agriculture, and integrated pollution prevention and control.

Moving on to ecological and economic assessment tools, I cannot stress enough how important they are. Without them, the Water Framework Directive would be a hollow instrument. Most Member States must improve their assessment tools. The Commission will do all it can to help Member States with these issues.

With regards to funding, it is the responsibility of Member States to adopt priorities and decide what measures EU funds should be spent on. The Commission is rather disappointed by water protection programmes and strategies adopted by the Member States so far. The Commission estimates that 35 billion euros will be required to build waste water treatment facilities in the new Member States. However, some of them have not yet allocated any funds, either national or EU ones, for the next financing period.

Much more work is needed in relation to Rural Development Plans in order to make them consistent with the Water Framework Directive. If this is not the case, the risk is that improvements reached through one instrument are then put in danger or eliminated by other measures. This would be an enormous waste of resources.

¹ They are, from worst to better, Italy, Greece, Finland, Sweden and Denmark.

As public participation is key to a successful water policy, it is important to make the most of this and not to treat it as an additional burden. The Commission and the EEA have worked hard to design an ambitious tool for informing citizens about water policy. Their co-operation is in fact important to obtain expected results. As you will discover today, this information tool is called the Water Information System for Europe.

I am committed to continuing the Common Implementation Strategy, a pledge by the European Commission to work closely with Member States to help with the implementation process by sharing experience and knowledge, defining best practices, and building capacity.

The implementation of the Water Framework Directive is the basis of our action. It would facilitate our tasks to tackle the challenges of the future, the first signs of which we are already seeing today.

The increase of the number and seriousness of extreme events like floods and droughts is expected. Unfortunately, the European Union, like many other parts of the world, will have to deal with both these challenges, apparently contradictory.

Climate change is exacerbating the risks of both. As we will not be able to avoid some of the impacts of climate change, adaptation is necessary. In addition to the Green Paper on adaptation that the Commission is preparing, we already have the tools to adapt. The Water Framework Directive and its pricing policies and the upcoming Marine Directive are two examples. They both factor in adaptation to climate change.

More integrated approaches are necessary to consider the water-related impacts of climate change. Working more closely with other sectors, in particular agriculture, transport, and energy, is therefore essential.

But climate change is clearly not the only cause of floods and droughts. Policies that have been followed so far in relation to, inter *alia*, soil management, deforestation and coastal management have certainly created the conditions that favour more devastating effects of otherwise natural events.

In this area, the level of preparedness varies considerably from one Member State to another. This level is even sometimes inadequate. Droughts are made worse in many regions because of the unsustainable use of water. The availability of water – or the lack thereof – is not sufficiently taken into account when deciding on how much and what crops to produce. This is an issue my colleague, Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel, will certainly be speaking about in more detail. I am also very pleased that the upcoming Portuguese Presidency has made this issue one of its priorities.

An ambitious policy to deal with these dangers is therefore necessary. And it is timely.

The sooner the proposed Directive on floods is adopted, the earlier we can start working on it. The more ambitious it is, the better results it will deliver.

To address droughts, a Communication on water scarcity and droughts is in the pipeline and the Commission expects to adopt it in the months to come, sometime in the summer of 2007.

Some interesting ideas were also discussed at the International Conference on water that took place in Berlin in February this year. I would like once again to thank Minister Gabriel for organising this event and initiating the debate in Council.

The challenge for policy makers is now to follow up and to change words into deeds.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When looking at what the future holds for us, it is clear that there is no room for complacency. EU policies provide the foundation for sustainable water management. A key focus must now be on implementation. Only proper implementation of the instruments for sound water management will ensure that our competitiveness is not harmed and that our health and biodiversity is not threatened. Member States must step up their efforts to implement these policies. The Commission is ready to help them achieve these goals in the interest of all European citizens.

I am very pleased that all these issues will be discussed during this Conference. It could have not come at a better time.

Thank you.