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PRESS RELEASE

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WATER SECURITY: DOES EUROPE HAVE A STRATEGY?

Water is a political issue, not a technical dossier

Brussels, 7 June – EU and national policymakers, NGOs and industry leaders gathered in Brussels today to attend a European Policy Summit on the challenges being created by climate change and inadequate water management.

Organised by the European Water Partnership (EWP) and the Brussels-based think tank, *Friends of Europe*, the one-day conference brought together some 250 participants from around the world. It is the second event of its kind, and EWP Chairman Tom Vereijken told delegates that it is to become an annual fixture in his organisation's calendar.

Water security is forcing its way on to the EU agenda. Climate change, increasing floods, drought and water scarcity are just some of the threats envisioned by European policymakers, NGOs, businesses and industry. To confront these threats, Europe needs an incisive, forward-looking water strategy.

Friends of Europe's Secretary General, Giles Merritt, commented in his welcoming remarks that in his think tank's view, "Water is no longer one of the EU's technical dossiers but a very important political issue."

Throughout the conference, speakers emphasised the need for more effective structures to address not only Europe's growing water shortages but also to tackle the major problems associated with water needs around the world. The Commission's Water Director, Grant Lawrence, highlighted the EU's Water Framework Directive: "The WFD is *the* tool for coping with today's water problems, as well as tomorrow's."

Fritz Holzwarth, Deputy Director General for Water at the German Ministry of Environment, stressed the need to clarify the issues involved: "We should not confuse the deficit in water management with the climate change problem."

The subject of development, and especially Africa, was raised by a senior Ghanaian official: "We have just heard that 0.5% of the Netherlands' GDP needs to be invested to adapt to climate change. African countries don't have this kind of wealth, so what EU strategies are in place to deal with this?"

The EWP used the occasion of the summit to announce that it is putting its weight behind the creation of 'The Dolphin Group', a new European Parliament inter-group for water issues. In addition, the World Water Council said at the event that it has requested the EWP to co-ordinate European input to the next World Water Forum in Turkey in 2009.

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The summit was also supported by the recently created Water Supply and Sanitation Technology Platform (WSSTP) and Dow Europe. Many of the issues that dominated the interactive debates throughout the day were covered in the advance Background Report (prepared by an advisory board member of the EWP) and made available to participants. Copies of the report and the Proceedings Summary published by *Friends of Europe* are available on request.

About the background report

The report concludes that the European Commission's water policy has largely been embraced as a serious attempt to create the necessary institutional framework for dealing with water stress and the effects of climate change. But not all Member States, particularly those bordering on the Mediterranean, are convinced that it sufficiently addresses their problems of water scarcity and drought. The Commission is expected to address these issues in a communication to be published this summer. Vested interests lobbying for a better deal in what is a costly and painful undertaking complicate policy implementation.

European water policy should focus on managing demand to reduce consumption rather than on seeking to increase water availability. Water storage is one solution, but environmentalists and NGOs disagree with business and industry on how best to implement it, the former being opposed to dam construction and keen that business and industry shoulder a greater share of the burden.

Also, lagging implementation of EU legislation by Member States raises the question of whether Europe even has the political will to do what is needed to confront water stress and the effects of climate change. More often than not, water constitutes a subtext to other policies, such as environment, health and competition, rather than a significant policy in its own right. Failure to anticipate problems now will undermine Europe's ability to address future water stress and could stymie economic growth.

European water policy is increasingly viewed as a model that could benefit less-developed countries. But for these countries to benefit from the model, heavy investment in infrastructure and good management is a *sine qua non*. Improving access to drinking water and sanitation in less-developed countries is in Europe's interest in its bid to stem the tide of illegal immigration. It is also an issue that goes to the core of Europe's water footprint: a footprint substantially enlarged by Europe's importation of water embedded in the procurement of food and goods produced outside the EU. This is one area where introduction of new technologies and production methods could produce the greatest water savings, as well as significant opportunities for business.

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