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

Brussels, 5 May 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr Seeber,

I would like to thank the Intergroup – and particularly Mr Seeber - for inviting me.

It is a pleasure to meet Europe's 'Water Ambassadors'. We come from different places, that is certain, but there is a real advantage to be gained by us working together on EU water policy. Earlier this year, at my EP hearing, I promised that I would take every opportunity to work closely with the Parliament – it is pleasing to be able to do so.

The history of water legislation in the EU is almost as long as the Rhine. But the current key piece of legislation – in terms of sustainable water management - is the Water Framework Directive from 2000.

And since the establishment, in 2001, of the informal "Common Implementation Strategy" for the Water Framework Directive, many of you - from the Member States, NGOs and as representatives of other stakeholders - have been active partners with us in making the Water Framework Directive more implementable. I wish the story were the same for all our environmental legislation.

Of course now we have reached a crucial moment in its implementation. For the 110 River Basin Districts across Europe, the River Basin Management Plans had to be adopted in December 2009 and communicated to the Commission in March 2010.

I'm certain you are wondering where we are with this. I won't keep you in suspense: we are doing alright, but we are not there yet.

This is what I mean:

- \* 14 Member States have adopted the plans<sup>1</sup>
- \* 4 have concluded consultations and are waiting for final adoption<sup>2</sup>
- \* 9 have not yet started or are 'on-going'<sup>3</sup>.

Several countries face important implementation delays. The Commission will continue enforcing the Water Framework Directive in this critical phase as it did with respect to previous implementation steps in the last decade.

But where the delays are happening in Mediterranean countries it is particularly worrying. I urge those Member States to speed up implementation: the earlier they face their severe problems, the better, particularly where water is already scarce.

One of these problems is over-abstraction – both legal and illegal - of surface and groundwater. Overuse is largely driven by agriculture that consumes up to 85% of resources in some Mediterranean river basins and two thirds on average in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> AT, BG, CZ, DE, EE, FI, FR, IT, LU, LV, NL, SE, SK and UK

<sup>2</sup> HU, IE, PL and RO

<sup>3</sup> BE, CY, DK, EL, ES, LT, MT, PT and SL

This means that water saving measures and increasing water efficiency have to be a priority. We need to:

- Look at the adequacy of the choice of crops in water stressed areas;
- Develop tools to crack down on illegal abstraction; and
- Establish an adequate water pricing policy, as required by the Water Framework Directive.

We also need to provide the right incentives to avoid water wastage. There is no sense in water pricing in agriculture being based on a fixed amount per irrigated hectare, rather than on actual water consumption. It does not provide any incentive for a rational use. To me, it would make more sense to concentrate on using the "user pays principle", meaning that we should incentivise final users (in agriculture) with adequate pricing, so that they would be pressed to invest in modern technologies and crop varieties that improve water efficiency. Or that they would change their choice of crop entirely.

Another major challenge ahead of us is integrating environmental concerns into future infrastructure projects for example for navigation or energy production. Also, competing uses for already stretched resources in water scarce areas will be exacerbated by reduced rainfall caused by climate change impacts. In the face of scientific uncertainty, we need to anticipate worse case scenarios. The failure to look further than the short term, in terms of human and ecological needs, will simply shift the problem to the next Commission – and to our children.

The Water Framework Directive offers the tools to face these challenges; and for many reasons.

It is flexible enough to accommodate the very different hydrological and water management realities in the EU.

It has a planning approach built into it. This gives Member States the perfect opportunity to mainstream water policy objectives into other policy areas and ensures that different uses can live side-by-side.

What's more, I believe that – as proposed in our Strategy on Water Scarcity and Drought in 2007 – good water management should be based on the water hierarchy: water demand management should come first and alternative supply options should only be considered once the potential for water savings and efficiency has been exhausted.

This approach is a concrete expression of the Commission flagship initiative on resource efficiency, as part of the EU2020. I want to see resource efficiency become the starting point for new policies and a means by which we can analyse and improve existing one... and not only water policies... it's a holistic approach which forces us to value the previous resources we have more and produce more from them (and consume less)... and ideally by using less of them.

The River Basin Management Plans I mentioned earlier are important. The Commission will assess the Plans prepared by the Member States in the coming months. We expect Member States to deliver ambitious plans, which will help us reach the goal of achieving good quality waters in 2015. In this respect, we will pay particular attention to how Member States use the exemptions to the environmental objectives of the Directive. And while these exemptions are possible, they will have to be applied in line with the criteria set out in the Directive.

We will publish our findings on the analysis of the River Basin Management Plans by the end of 2012, as part of the "Blueprint to Safeguard European Waters." This blueprint will also include a review of the EU policy on Water Scarcity and Droughts and an assessment of the vulnerability of water resources to climate impacts and other man-made pressures.

The Blueprint will not try and reinvent the wheel. The main policy and legislative water framework is already in place; and therefore, our focus will be on three elements:

- \* First, implementation problems and ways to overcome them;
- \* Second, filling in the legislative gaps - with a special focus on resource efficiency; and
- \* Third, developing the knowledge base for effective and efficient implementation and further development of water policy in the medium to long term to adapt to climate change and other man made pressures.

The Blueprint will take a strategic approach to EU water policy and highlight the links with other EU policies and the need to achieve implementation also via integration in the other policy areas.

Allow me to stress this point.

While it is clear that the implementation of the Water Framework Directive requires resources at Member States level, we need to make sure that, at the EU level, agriculture, regional, energy, industrial, transport and research policies – to name only a few – all contribute to water protection, saving and efficiency.

To enable real changes, these EU policies have all efficient tools, that is financial incentives, which we should in future combine with legal framework and soft measures that are already at hand.

Moreover, we should not underestimate the business opportunities that such an approach would offer in terms of development of know-how, new technologies and new business models.

There are important deadlines ahead of us.

Later this year and then in mid-2011, the Commission will table proposals for the next financial framework post-2013, which will include proposals for changes to some of the major EU policies, such as the CAP and the Cohesion policy. The

opportunity to integrate water-related issues into these two policies in the future must not be missed.

For the Common agriculture policy reform, there should be a clear objective to deliver public goods to society at large. Only such an approach would justify the continuation of a high level of funding. Cross-compliance and rural development funding are two key areas to ensure the implementation of, and compliance with, water legislation and policies.

I firmly believe the Water Framework Directive should be covered by the cross-compliance mechanism. In this way, we could contribute to improving water quality across the board, as cross compliance applies to all of the 1<sup>st</sup> pillar, and in this way, to most of the EU's arable land. At the same time, the rules on cross compliance need both streamlining and reinforcing in their deterrent effect.

Moreover, rural development funding for environment policy should be increased. This would allow for, among other things, increasing investments for delivering good quality water and resilient ecosystems; that can adapt to a changing climate and contribute to the prevention of disasters such as floods and droughts.

Similarly, in the context of the Cohesion policy review, we need to pay special attention to fostering green infrastructures, such as multipurpose river floodplains to provide clean water, water availability, biodiversity and flood protection. Cohesion policy should also contribute more in the future to achieving water policy targets.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I called you 'Water Ambassadors'. Perhaps 'water saviours' might be even more appropriate. Because you have a crucially important role to play with respect to these upcoming policy reviews. You of all people understand the central importance of water. You have the powers to shape the future CAP and the future Cohesion policy, and a decisive say on the next financial perspectives.

Let us cooperate closely in the coming months to achieve our common end... making sure that Europe has enough good quality water to go round for everyone.

That would be something we could all be proud of.