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European Parliament**

**WETSUS International Congress: "International ambition for water
technology"**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak at WETSUS's international congress. In my former capacity as Commissioner for Regional Policy, I visited WETSUS as part of my visit to the North of the Netherlands in December 2006, and I must say I was impressed by the innovative processes that are applied not only at WETSUS, but also at a number of other institutions in the region. I feel it is worth pointing out the high-quality research that is performed in a region such as that around Leeuwarden in spite of the absence of a university in the city's direct surroundings. This is invaluable for the continued development of a region like yours.

I am going to speak to you about two things today: first of all, there is the important issue of water and recent developments related to it, and secondly, I was asked to discuss the objectives of the committee on regional development of the European Parliament in the new legislature.

I find the topic of water particularly relevant as it concerns our future; we are talking here about solidarity with next generations. It is therefore good news for me that you

have gathered at this conference to discuss this topic, which I believe is central to the future development not only of Europe, but of the world as a whole.

We all know that our society's lifestyle has increased the pressure on the availability of water as well as its quality over the past few decades. Despite the fact that Europe is usually regarded as a continent with sufficient water resources, we must be aware that we are not immune to the challenges that are posed to us by water. Global warming is aggravating the situation as well. Temperatures are likely to increase on the long term, and this will have serious effects on the supply of water. Droughts have plagued parts of our continent already, and are foreseen to continue in the future. There are many studies confirming the dangers of global warming to the water supply.

The fact that the water challenge is affecting European development in an asymmetric way from the territorial perspective certainly matters. We are likely to witness an increase in precipitation in the Northern part of Europe, while the South will be faced with increased drought. It does not take an expert to realize that this will increase the incidence of natural disasters and that it will change river flows, resulting in more floods or water scarcity. This might lead to a new map of Europe, where current disparities might increase and new ones might surface. This will all depend on how we react to these developments and challenges at all governance levels.

Despite the potential scarcity of water that we might be faced with in the future, our data tell us that 60% of Europeans over-exploit water resources. All of this is happening at a time when the availability of fresh water in some parts of the world could decrease by as much as 20 or 30% in the next few years as a result of climate change.

I am sure that you will discuss at a later stage during the conference the potential and real impacts that the water challenge is having and might have on our life as citizens, on our economy, and in particular on sectors which rely heavily on water supply. I am thinking about agriculture, but also about tourism and many industrial sectors, including such basic ones as energy and transport.

During my tenure at the European Commission, I had many meetings with authorities of regions affected by droughts, floods, and fires in the context of their applications for the European Solidarity Fund. I have seen how seriously incidents of this kind can reduce economic activity, and how they can bring about losses in forestry, livestock, and farming - to mention just a few of the potential consequences. One can only imagine the impact of such events on biodiversity, soil impoverishment, or water quality and accessibility.

These are only a few examples of factors behind the risk of water scarcity. We have, therefore, been investing at the EU level for years in creating a legal framework that would give us a solid foundation, shared across our territory, for an ambitious water policy. We need such a policy not only for today, but we need it out of solidarity with future generations.

So where do we stand today in Europe regarding the smart use of water? I would say the awareness is certainly growing. There is commitment and it is spreading. But there is still a lot of precious water being wasted, so we need effort and engagement. We need this from politicians, from industries, from consumers. What we need most is education.

The current crisis has already triggered a lot of restructuring, related first of all to energy efficiency and the use of alternative energy sources. I see no reason why water efficiency should not be part of these plans: we can come out of the crisis not only more energy efficient, but also more water efficient.

The objectives of regional policy have changed a lot over the last decade with the accession of central and eastern European states in 2004 and 2007, most of which are poorer than the 'old' EU-15 member states. The priorities have changed as well: where regional policy mainly focused on infrastructure in the past, it focuses more and more on sustainable developments today. Structural funds are also increasingly used to invest in research and development, in education and the environment. The total structural and cohesion funding allocated to environmental investment – both direct and indirect – for the period from 2007 to 2013 amounts to 105 billion euro, or

30.4% of the total policy funding. It is nearly three times more than in the previous policy period of 2000 to 2006. 22 billion euro of these funds actually go directly to the water sector.

As you probably know, the right of initiative in the European Union lies with the Commission, but other European institutions, in particular the European Parliament, have been very active in the area of water management as well. The Parliament trusts that it is possible to find a balance between economic development, environmental protection, and the sustainable management of resources – water in particular – which are the elements defining the attractiveness of a territory in the long term. We should, however, stress that in any case the EU budget can and should not be the only source of investing in smart water management.

This is where organizations like WETSUS enter the picture. We hope that you will be able to contribute positively to these objectives by continuing your research in the field of water technology. We all realise that this kind of research will make a difference for the future of Europe. I know for a fact that this task has been taken very seriously in Leeuwarden. I am convinced that your conference will contribute to spreading awareness of important issues related to water to citizens and decision makers alike. The challenges we face are unprecedented, but I feel that we can drive these threats back and come out of the water challenge as winners.

Thank you very much for your attention.