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## **How plastic bags pollute the future of our seas**

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Round table discussion on pollution of the Mediterranean from marine litter

**Athens, 8 April 2011**

The pollution of the Mediterranean Sea from marine litter -and especially plastic litter- has now taken alarming dimensions. It is an open wound for biodiversity, ecosystems and after all, for man himself and our civilisation.

In the Mediterranean Sea, the sea of the three continents, which is considered to be the caucous of civilisation, the situation of marine litter and especially plastic litter has taken threatening dimensions. Despite all the efforts made on an international, regional and national level, there are clear indications that the marine litter is increasing. Last July a Franco-Belgian research team announced the results of their research; there were almost 250 billion small pieces of plastic in the Mediterranean and an additional 500 tones of dissolved plastic litter on the surface of our sea.

This situation cannot continue. The Mediterranean is a closed sea with a renewal pace of every 80 to 90 years. This makes it especially vulnerable to pollution. In addition, if we take into account that this sea entails 6% of the whole of marine species even if it represents only 1% of the global sea range, then we realise the urging need for its protection. For the European Union the big challenge is to achieve a considerable and countable reduction of marine pollution in the Mediterranean through specific and concrete action plans.

This is a problem needing solutions on multiple levels and for this reason there has to be a mobilisation and cooperation of different Commission services and regional authorities. This is the reason why Mr. Potočnik and I invited you today.

The starting point for confronting a problem is always an in-depth analysis.

Which are its causes? Mr. Potočnik's presentation was very clear and as you saw there are concrete planned actions for studying the problem further.

Moreover, the consequences of the marine pollution have to be measured. There are negative effects in the whole ecosystem and therefore in fisheries as well. The cases of marine species which are in danger because of the plastic marine litter are known. The damage caused by the biological dissolution of plastics in the food chain of the marine ecosystem and the threat that this represents to human health is also clear.

Beyond these direct consequences, marine litter also affects the main financial sectors active around the Mediterranean, such as the development of sea areas, tourism and the shipping industry. As Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, I intend to pull all the strings at my disposal to see the problem of marine litter in the Mediterranean fully addressed.

We have to admit that the mobilisation of people is impressive. Thousands of citizens around the world are campaigning for action to be taken. The latest example of such a mobilisation was the online campaign Clean and Protect the Mediterranean from the organisation Change.org. The participants asked the European Commission to put forward an immediate solution to the issue of plastic litter pollution.

So, what can we do? There are two parts in the process of solving this problem.

The first part is the limitation of pollution at its source. Regarding the plastic litter pollution, the most efficient measure would be the limitation or ban of use of plastic bags. Inside the European Union this issue is handled differently in each member-State. The most striking example is Italy, where plastic bags were banned from use since the beginning of the year. There are relevant measures taken in other member-States as well. In Ireland, for instance, which was the first country to have ever taken action on the matter, there is a duty on the plastic bags of around 22 cents since 2002 and this has resulted in a significant reduction of the plastic bags use. In Belgium there is a voluntary agreement of the retail sales sector not to issue or at least to charge the one-use plastic bags and as a result consumers now

prefer multiple-use bags, which aren't necessarily plastic. The same goes for Germany and Denmark, where shops charge plastic bags despite the lack of an existing relevant legislation. Also, in many countries outside of the European Union the use of plastic bags is restricted by law or even forbidden: in many States in the USA, in India, South Africa, New Zealand and Bangladesh there are legislative or voluntary projects on the matter either already implemented or in the phase of elaboration.

The issue of banning plastic bags was also put on the agenda of the Council of Ministers of Environment, on Austrian initiative after the case of Italy. In the discussion that followed it was clear that all States agreed upon the one or the other form of banning plastic bags, and thus the Commission will now have to examine in detail the problem and its solutions.

This is for "restricting the problem at its source".

The second part of the solution is decontamination. Here the actions that need to be taken are more difficult, time-consuming and expensive. Of course rising citizens' awareness and of NGOs mobilisation can have a significant impact on the issue. Nevertheless, the quantity of marine litter is such that these actions alone are not enough. There has to be a similar intervention in the open seas as well, where we can trace a big amount of marine litter and especially plastic litter.

The services under my responsibility will take action in this context: the European Fisheries Fund offers now to fishermen and stakeholders the possibility to develop projects that may contribute to the preservation of the marine environment, such as for instance through "fishing for litter" initiatives.

Such projects are already on-going in some countries, for example in France, where the initiative will be launched on May 20th. In specific, a pilot project will be launched under the auspices and funding of the European Fisheries Fund and in cooperation with the sectors of fisheries and plastics industry whereby the marine litter will be collected by special fishing vessels and sent for treatment.

There will be a multiple benefit from this. On the one hand, we will have a visible result in terms of decontamination. Much of the litter collected will be recyclable, so this will also have an extra benefit for the economy. On the other hand, fishermen will be able to engage in an alternative activity which will bring them additional income, especially during the time periods when they stop fishing.

The Fisheries fund can also, in cooperation with the local authorities and municipalities, co-finance simple but efficient port reception facilities in order to collect the waste of fishing and recreational boats who are using the countless small ports (fishing shelters) existing along the Greek coastline. This waste should be then sent for proper processing and recycling.

I would like to appeal today to all Mediterranean Member States and in particular to the Greek authorities present here, to fully explore the possibilities of their respective Fisheries Fund Operational Programmes for actions aiming to reduce marine waste including collection and recycling initiatives.

The plastics industry should also take up its responsibilities, by producing more biodegradable plastics. In the same time the citizens, the sailors and the fishermen when they enjoy the sea either for professional or recreational activities they should change their current behaviour. They should act as guardians of the sea and produce less waste and especially less plastic waste.

To conclude, the last part of action for the pollution of the marine litter problem is to impose sanctions to the violators of these rules. This will be a responsibility of the national authorities, but it is a necessary measure for the efficient solution to the problem.

I hope that these initiatives will be the starting point of a fight for the protection of the Mediterranean, which we will engage in and win. We owe this to the generations to come, to our civilisation and to this sea, which is a source of life, development and inspiration.