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Commissioner

Opening address

***Renewable Energy for Europe -
Research in Action***

Conference
Brussels – 21 November 2005

NB: Due to transportation difficulties that prevented Commissioner's arrival, the speech was delivered on his behalf by Mr Fernandez Ruiz, Director, Directorate J, DG RTD

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this Conference.

It is encouraging to see so many representatives of renewable energy research, science and technology, industry and policy-making from all around Europe - and even beyond - gathered together here today.

In particular, I would like to thank Mr Malcolm Wicks, the UK Energy Minister, Mrs Britta Thomsen, vice-chair of the European Parliament ITRE Committee, and Mr Graeme Sweeney, CEO of Shell Renewables for accepting our invitation to take part in this opening session and to share their ideas on future prospects for renewable energy research.

This conference aims to set out the important role that renewable energy research plays in Europe, and to enhance awareness of future opportunities within the wider picture of the overall energy portfolio and market conditions. Developments in recent months, including the increasing volatility in oil prices and increased awareness of the effects of global warming, make this a highly appropriate moment to hold this conference.

We will see a series of European renewable energy research success stories and also hear about the existing and planned European technology platforms on various forms of renewable energy.

We will learn about the efforts being put into national energy research programmes and examine the possibilities to stimulate coordination. We will also have a session dealing with renewable energy research in the international context.

Beyond this, I urge you to take some time to visit the side events, which include a special display by researchers from the new Member States and Candidate Countries showing their expertise in renewable energy research, as well as the stands of the renewable energy industry associations.

I am especially pleased to be given this opportunity to meet you at this important time for European research policy; with discussions in full swing on the Seventh Framework Programme, including its energy part.

Let me therefore say a few words on the broader context:

Building the knowledge society through research, innovation, and education in a stronger partnership with Member States is at the heart of the renewed Lisbon strategy - the partnership for growth and jobs. The EU's research policy has a major role to play in this respect.

The emerging markets in which we compete are increasingly global and knowledge-intensive. Our true factor of competitiveness lies in our brains and our creativity: “knowledge” in the broadest sense of the word.

Last month, in partnership with my colleague Günter Verheugen, I tabled an integrated Research and Innovation Action Plan which calls for a major upgrade of the conditions for research and innovation in Europe.

We are also mainstreaming the "knowledge for growth" concept in all EU funding programmes, such as the structural funds, the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme, and of course, the 7th Framework Programme.

Back in April we presented our proposal for the 7th Framework Programme, which will run from 2007 to 2013. We followed this up in September with our detailed proposals for the Specific Programmes and these should be followed soon by our proposal for the Rules for Participation.

All these efforts are aimed at implementing the Lisbon Strategy by helping to build an integrated European Research Area where the best research can be carried out, capable of attracting investment from all over the world.

That is why - in line with the scale of our ambition and the importance of research to achieving the Lisbon goals - we proposed a doubling of the overall funding for FP7, including an increased budget for energy research of close to three billion €.

But it is not simply the size of the proposed budget that demonstrates our ambition. Although the 7th Framework Programme will be very much about continuity with FP6, it also includes a number of very important innovations of which I would like to mention a few:

The creation of a European Research Council (ERC) will, for the first time, directly support basic and fundamental research in all scientific fields, including energy, of course. The ERC will enjoy a high degree of autonomy and integrity, funding the best of European investigator-driven research solely on the basis of excellence.

The establishment of Joint Technology Initiatives (JTI) aims to accelerate the development of major technologies through ambitious pan-European public/private partnerships. The areas already identified include hydrogen and fuel cells, and I should add here that the relevant Specific Programme expressly mentions that renewable energy may be identified as an additional JTI during the implementation of the 7th Framework Programme. But I have to stress that commitment from private sector and Member States will remain an indispensable condition for their creation.

Another change you will wish to note is that special attention will be devoted to the use of joint calls, where I see great potential for linking together different elements of the programme, for example combining calls in the energy and environment themes.

I would also like to emphasise that I attach particular importance to the efforts that we have put into simplification of the rules for participation in the next Framework Programme, and I hope that many of you will have an opportunity to benefit from them in the future.

These new instruments and the corresponding increased budget for European research are not a luxury. They respond to a major need expressed by European industry itself.

There is an equally strong need to ensure critical mass and coherence for major research and technology programmes and projects, which can only be ensured through very substantial European funding. This is the core reasoning behind the Commission's proposal to double the budget and create ambitious new instruments in the 7th Framework Programme.

As you will be aware, the question of financial support for the 7th Framework Programme depends on the outcome of the current debate on the Financial Perspectives.

All governments agree that knowledge is the key to Europe's competitiveness. All agree that we cannot afford to delay. And yet, the signals are not encouraging. Here I can only repeat that, if we are serious about the future of Europe, we need to invest in growth-generating actions and give priority to research, knowledge and innovation.

Europe's leaders have an opportunity to make a courageous and collective political decision to demonstrate their serious commitment to the Lisbon vision, and it is one that I hope they will not miss.

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Let me come back to some of the questions closely associated with energy related research.

Global economic development has led to a rapid growth in energy needs. Climatic and geo-political risks associated with continued dependence on fossil sources require us to take a look at how we intend to address our energy needs in the future.

And when we talk about the future, I do not believe that there is one single solution to which we should pin all our hopes. It is our responsibility to keep options open, for ourselves and for our children and for our grandchildren. Therefore we should strive to have a sustainable energy mix. As they say, we should not put all of our eggs in one basket.

And we should not confuse the immediate response to these challenges with our planning for the future.

Our immediate and medium term response lays in our environment and energy policies, covering such important aspects as security of energy supply, greenhouse gases and climate change, support to the wider adoption of renewable energies, and the competitiveness of EU industry in the energy sector.

Environment and Energy policies are interrelated with our research policy but nevertheless distinct from it. Today's research policy provides the knowledge for tomorrow's energy policy. Our long-term goal is a transformation of the current fossil-fuel based energy system into a more secure, energy-efficient, and sustainable one. Enhancing our knowledge of renewable energy sources through research is an important step to achieving this goal as part of a sustainable energy mix. And this importance is reflected in the position in the Seventh Framework programme of

research which directly or indirectly advances our knowledge in this area.

Renewable energy will be supported under the headings of renewable electricity generation, renewable fuel production, and renewables for heating and cooling, while some of the other energy themes such as smart electricity networks include cross-cutting research themes relevant to renewables such as distributed generation. In other words, all renewable energy sources will be supported – biomass, photovoltaics, wind, ocean, solar thermal, small hydro, and geothermal.

We wish to build on the success stories from our previous Framework Programmes which have helped to raise European industries to world-leading positions in the wind power and bio-diesel sectors, and to the number two position in photovoltaics, just to take a few examples.

One of the tools that may prove very efficient are Technology Platforms. They are set to become powerful actors in EU research policy as champions of knowledge for growth. The Strategic Research Agendas which they have developed have already had a considerable impact on the shaping of the proposal for the 7th Framework Programme.

In the field of Renewable Energy, we already have a Photovoltaics Platform in operation and a Biofuels for Transport Platform is under preparation, with its Advisory Council shortly to publish a Vision Report. I am also aware of the interest shown by the respective industries and research communities in setting up technology platforms for Wind and Solar Thermal Power.

The EU is considered as world leader in renewable energy technologies, a result of strong national and EU level effort. Europe's investment in renewables related research is massive in comparison with the US and Japan. According to some estimates EU investment is one third larger than that of those two countries combined. This is the case at the EU level, with Community funds supporting roughly quarter of the publicly financed Energy research.

While it remains imperative to explore all other short and long term options that are or may be available to us in the future, I am determined that we must maintain this leadership in the area of renewable energy.

The Commission has translated this ambition in our proposal for next seven years of European research. But it is you who hold keys to new discoveries and this is why I very much look forward to hearing the conclusions of your deliberations during the course of this conference.

Thank you for your attention and the best of success!