

Speech by Commissioner Phil Hogan at the Launch of SIRO Rural Trial at National Ploughing Championships

- Ratheniska, Co. Laois

24th September 2015

- Check Against Delivery –

- Ladies and gentlemen, many thanks for inviting me here today.
- As EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, and as an Irishman who represented a rural constituency for many years, I am delighted that Ireland is taking a leadership role in rural connectivity.
- We know that access to reliable, high-speed internet connections will be absolutely crucial if rural areas are to thrive in the 21st Century.

- The existing rural economic and social infrastructure will be enhanced by new technology. In agriculture, farmers will benefit from new technologies such as increased use of sensors to track animal health and improve crop yields. This data can be relayed directly to their home computer or mobile phone, freeing farmers up to do other vital work.
- In rural schools, the educational horizons for children can be expanded greatly, providing teachers with new tools and technologies. Rural residents will have access to a wide world of online education and training, while primary and second level students can work on projects via interactive video and online collaboration.
- Better connectivity also has a real social dividend, providing access to healthcare solutions replacing or complementing physical visits, decreasing the need for travel and promoting greater independence and improving quality of life for older people.
- Looking ahead, we must recognize that a new generation of young rural citizens has different skills, needs and expectations to that of their parents.

- They want to modernise existing rural jobs and create a whole generation of new ones.
- New small and medium-sized businesses will appear in any given area where full connectivity is realised. This will incentivise rural dwellers to stay in their local areas as well as attracting new residents.
- The European Commission recognises the importance of rural broadband rollout, and has prioritised it in the EU Digital Single Market package. The ambition is to close the digital gap between urban and rural areas, by providing fast or ultra-fast broadband across the EU by 2020.
- These are not just lofty words: we are adding real value by putting our money where our mouth is.
- **Roughly €21.4 billion from the five EU Structural and Investment Funds will be devoted to Information and Communication Technologies. Within this, approximately €6.4 billion EUR will finance the roll-out of high speed broadband.**

- From the CAP budget, the estimated contribution from Rural Development funding will be between €1.6 and 2 billion Euro. This money will, among other things, help to prepare communities throughout the EU by providing training so that they are ready to make the most of connectivity when it is in place.
- Rolling out high speed broadband for rural areas is an important policy priority for my mandate, and I am working closely with the Commissioner for Regional Development Corina Cretu to deliver a good result. In fact, Commissioner Cretu and I will both speak at a rural broadband event this coming Monday in Dublin Castle. We must maintain momentum if we are to achieve our goals.
- I commend SIRO for the work you are doing developing a fibre to the building (FTTB) broadband network in a number of Irish regional towns, and now this hugely impressive rural trial in Ratheniska. We're all familiar with sheepdog trials, so let's hope this trial also helps to put rural areas on the map!

- You couldn't have selected a better place, given Ratheniska's renown as a rural hub thanks to the hugely successful National Ploughing Championships. Ratheniska also typifies a rural Irish community, with its local national school, community hall, GAA club, farming community and smattering of local entrepreneurs.
- So let's see what this well-known rural community can do when given the fastest fibre connection in the country!
- With broadband speeds of up to 1 gigabit, Ratheniska's connection will be 4 times faster than the fastest connection in Dublin. Indeed, it will be on a par with some of the world's leading cities, such as Tokyo and Hong Kong.
- This opens up a whole new world of possibilities for job creation. It means that rural communities can be real partners in building the service-led knowledge economy we aspire to in Ireland.
- Ireland can be proud that the country is emerging as a European leader in this area. Make no mistake: other countries are taking note, and the success of these programmes matters a great deal.

- The challenge for Irish and European policymakers is to maintain the momentum generated by these successes, in order to ensure that rollout continues across Europe.
- In Ratheniska, and other connected rural communities, the challenge is to make the most of this brave new world. I encourage residents, farmers and entrepreneurs of all ages to grasp this opportunity with both hands. Take risks, be creative, think ahead.
- Ladies and gentlemen, we cherish our rural communities in Ireland. As Commissioner, this is an attitude I try to promote throughout the European Union. We must view our rural areas as key drivers of our shared prosperity and sustainable growth.
- As problems of an urgent global nature multiply, rural areas are increasingly being viewed as holding many of the solutions, in terms of food security, renewable energy, environmental sustainability and water provision.

- Providing genuine connectivity will be vital if we are serious about enabling rural areas and the communities that live in them to be full partners in developing these solutions. And I congratulate SIRO for selecting Ratheniska to lead this charge. Thank you.