

**HEARING BY THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT  
INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER-  
DESIGNATE**

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**Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries**

**29 September 2014**

**Check against Delivery**

**Introductory Speech Karmenu Vella**

Mr. Chairmen, honourable Members of the European Parliament.

I have been given the mandate by President-elect Juncker to assure the sustainability of our environment, the preservation of our natural resources and the conservation of our marine biological resources.

I was also asked to focus on the contribution that the green economy and the blue economy can make to competitiveness, growth, jobs and stimulating investment.

Let me start with **Green Growth** as my first priority.

With continuing record levels of unemployment, Europe must continue its efforts to strengthen global competitiveness while creating jobs and growth. This will be the over-arching priority of this Commission.

But despite Europe's economic challenges, 95% of its citizens still care about the environment. As one of them, I strongly believe that growth will be impossible if it is not fair and sustainable.

Mr. Chairman please allow me to say a few words in Maltese.

Is-sostenibbilta mhix kapricc – hija krucjali ghall-futur ekonomiku taghna.

Din tghallimtha matul l-esperjenza tieghi bhala Ministru tat-Turizmu ghal Malta. It-turizmu jikkontribwixxi ghal terz tal-GDP ta' Malta, izda fih innifsu t-turizmu jiddependi 100% mill-ambjent: arja nadifa, ibhra minghajr periklu u bajjiet nodfa huma ftit minn hafna ezempji.

*(Sustainability is not a luxury - it is crucial for our economic future.*

*I have learnt this as tourism minister of Malta. Tourism contributes 33 % of Malta's GDP, but tourism itself depends 100 % on the environment: clean beaches, safe waters and clean air are but a few examples.)*

The 7th Environmental Action Programme sets out a roadmap for stimulating resource-efficient low carbon growth and innovation, while protecting our natural capital and safeguarding the health and well-being of our citizens.

If I become your Commissioner, this will be, for me the guiding framework.

It is my firm belief that real sustainable growth can only be achieved by a change towards a more circular economy.

We need a systemic change in the use and recovery of resources to assure competitiveness and the jobs of the future.

This entails keeping resources in use for as long as possible, extracting maximum value from them, and re-generating materials from products at the end of their life-cycle.

Promoting close cooperation between business and policymakers is essential to achieve these goals.

My second priority will be protecting the **natural capital** on which sustainable growth depends.

The Natura 2000 network covers nearly one fifth of Europe's territory, but only 17 % of our habitats and species are in a good state.

We must step up efforts to meet the 2020 biodiversity targets with a legal framework that is fit for purpose.

Therefore, my task to carry out an “in-depth evaluation of the Birds and Habitats directives” is an assignment to maintain and, where necessary, improve the protection for our ecosystems and vulnerable species.

My third priority will be to safeguard the Union's citizens from environment-related pressures and risks to **health**.

Much remains to be done to improve the quality of the air we breathe, and of the waters in our lakes, rivers and oceans.

Our citizens continue to suffer from the effects of air pollution, especially in urban centres. They deserve that the necessary action will be taken.

The earlier we act, the less costly the remedial actions.

And we must continue implementing REACH, as the Union's instrument to address the risks from chemicals.

Work on all these priorities will require the following:

**First**, improving the state of the environment cannot be delivered through environment policy alone. I am confident that my Commission colleagues will support me in mainstreaming environment into their policy areas.

**Second**, Member States need to improve their performance. In some respects significantly. Working with them to promote compliance and developing the necessary tools will be important.

But I will not hesitate to make full use of the Commission's legal enforcement powers whenever and wherever this is necessary.

**Finally**, the EU will need to maintain its international lead in environmental issues and in developing the Sustainable Development Goals.

Let me now turn to **maritime affairs and fisheries**. It is no accident that RIO+20 identified the oceans as the next big challenge for assuring sustainable development.

I was born and brought up in a fishing village in the South of Malta, an island heavily dependent on the maritime economy.

I therefore have some personal understanding of the concerns of fishermen and the importance of the sea for the economy of many regions of the European Union.

I have three fundamental priorities in this area: implementing the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, using it to leverage better international governance, and developing the potential of our maritime policies to promote blue growth.

With the **reform of the CFP** the fishing industry and the environmental organisations have recognised both the common interest in rebuilding the stocks of fish, as well as the social and economic needs of the fishermen and the coastal communities.

A successful policy needs both the fish in the sea and the people that can make a living from fishing it.

I am committed to seeing the reform put in action as it was agreed.

We have collectively agreed to achieve maximum sustainable yields by 2015 where possible and at the latest by 2020 – the sooner the better – .

This means putting in place the multi-annual plans and a regionalisation that maintains the European nature of the policy while respecting the particularities of each fishing region.

We also need to implement the discard ban. We must not under-estimate the difficulties but let's find a way to do this by creating a buy-in from our fishermen to ensure its full implementation.

I want to make sure that the new European Maritime and Fisheries Fund will help this process.

Implementing the reform means that we also need to ensure that non-EU Member States will equally respect the need for sustainability and protection of stocks.

Which takes me to my second priority: **better international governance**. We must use our weight in the international community to guarantee that our own conservation mechanisms will be matched by similar international measures to preserve the fishing stock.

And we need to use the full range of instruments at our disposal to tackle illegal fishing.

But international governance goes beyond fisheries; it also includes the maritime environment.

Our overall goal must be to work towards achieving a level playing field in the international governance of fisheries and the maritime environment. Those who play by the rules must not be penalised.

This brings me to my third priority, **blue growth**.

There are 3.6 million jobs in the EU maritime economy and in a number of sectors there is potential for more growth, especially in renewable energy, aquaculture, and possibly in biotech.

Many of these activities go beyond our coastal regions and involve economic activities inland: ports need transport links, energy from our oceans needs to be transmitted.

So our integrated maritime policy is central to achieving growth and jobs as well as for assuring sustainability in our maritime and coastal activities. These need to be properly planned using the maritime spatial planning directive.

I look forward to cooperating with all my colleagues in the Commission to deliver blue growth.

For instance in intensifying our research: Our oceans make up two thirds of our planet but we know less about the bottom of our seas than we do about the surface of the moon.

To conclude, I believe that environment, maritime affairs and fisheries are a natural fit.

Green growth and blue growth are two sides of the same coin. Sustainability is the key principle in all areas of my portfolio, with its economic, social and environmental dimensions.

Together with you much can be achieved. If confirmed, I hope I can count on you as my partners in getting it done.