

Maria Damanaki

European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

Opening address

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"Pact of Islands": conference and signing ceremony at the
Committee of the Regions

Brussels, 12 April 2011

Mr Chairman, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your kind invitation to share this important moment with you. I accepted it with enthusiasm: I want to convey my support to all the signatories present today.

Your initiative makes you front runners in promoting an independent and environmentally sound energy supply. It is a bottom-up, voluntary commitment that crosses geographical and national borders, it links together authorities, territories and ultimately people in a common effort toward sustainability. And it is exactly what our Integrated Maritime Policy is all about.

As Commissioner for maritime affairs I often have to spend much of my time arguing the logical case for an integrated approach to the sea.

But I don't need to do that today.

You know better than anyone that everything is connected.

You know that extending a harbour to improve facilities for tourists can affect the distribution of sand on the beaches that the tourists come to enjoy.

You don't have to be told that enterprises in innovative underwater technologies are more likely to flourish if they benefit from a thorough knowledge of oceans and seas.

You are also aware that our seas and coasts are changing faster than ever before. And the people who live from the sea have had to adapt to these changes.

Like coastal regions, islands have to react to global economic forces. Fierce competition means that the marine engineering industry has to specialise and innovate. We need to take advantage of new opportunities such as offshore energy to generate growth and jobs.

These common challenges mean that regional authorities from islands have more in common with each other than with inland regions in the same country. Your initiative can help a lot.

The same common challenges also prompted Commission President Barroso to pinpoint the maritime sector as a prime source of new growth, employment and social cohesion. The "EUROPE 2020 strategy" highlighted the importance of the maritime sectors in the particular context of resource efficiency, competitiveness and climate action.

We know that there is clearly scope for the oceans, seas and coasts to unlock new sustainable sources of growth. And we must be capable of channelling these activities into industrial applications and ensuring that they benefit society. It is what I like to call "Blue Growth" and "Blue Jobs": that is, finding and applying sustainable growth scenarios for our seas and coasts.

I think we can all play a role here – and by 'we' I mean on the one hand we as EU institutions and on the other the Member States and you as elected representatives of insular communities.

For example, we know that marine renewable energy systems have the potential to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and cut our carbon emissions. The winds, waves, currents and tides off Europe's shores represent a vast, clean energy resource that we have yet to tap into properly.

Offshore wind energy is developing fast, and with similar progress with wave and tidal energy, we could go a long way towards meeting our energy and climate goals, including the renewable energy target of 20% by 2020.

Obviously this will require huge investments. But these will be compensated by the savings on our fossil fuel bill, which is only bound to increase in the future.

The same cost considerations apply to nuclear energy. The Japan nuclear disaster has shown that it is more and more expensive to produce safe and environmentally sustainable nuclear energy. The cost of safety can be much higher than the cost of producing energy from renewable sources.

So the EU needs to provide the legal and political framework to trigger the transition and open new frontiers; it needs to flank investors and entrepreneurs in making the best choices for their own returns on one hand and for sustainability on the other.

You, at the same time, can talk to people and private industry and convince them that this is the way to go; show them that maintaining both high environmental standards and high social standards is in fact a win-win choice; explain that investing in clean technologies and creating new, attractive jobs on European islands is a smart move right now.

You need to explain that initial capital investment or daily operating costs should not be the main concern: long-term prosperity and a stable society are.

Again, as Commissioner for Maritime Affairs, but also as a native from an island myself, I am particularly sensitive to the needs and challenges of islands and peripheral regions. A lot can be done in this regard within the remit of my mandate - and we are doing it!

Since 2007 we have been developing the Integrated Maritime Policy precisely to enable policy makers at every level of governance to pursue a coordinated and sustainable development of maritime activities.

We have been devising a series of tools for this purpose, such as common systems for maritime surveillance and spatial planning - or the recent Marine Knowledge 2020 initiative, which will establish a network of accessible, compatible and timely data on the status of our seas. Urgent issues such as maritime safety, substandard shipping or short-sea shipping are equally being tackled.

In the energy domain, we intend to continue to provide EU funds for research and at the same time introduce clear policies in this field.

I am working closely with my colleagues Máire Geoghegan-Quinn and Günther Oettinger to ensure that our energy supply vision for the next decade is clearly set out, also and especially in its marine dimension.

We need to put more focus on renewable ocean energy. Not only off-shore wind energy, but sea energy. For example energy coming from waves, tides, the exploitation of algae or thermal sea potential.

This energy is cleaner. It will help us to achieve our climate action and resource efficiency targets and will aid the diversification of energy sources. It also offers a huge potential for highly qualified new employment in maritime sectors and coastal regions. Europe is by excellence the maritime continent and we should take the lead in the development of sustainable marine energy sources.

For example we are evaluating the infrastructure needed by 2020 and 2030 to bring offshore and marine renewable energy onshore to consumers.

We also recently launched the "Ocean of Tomorrow" call for projects, which is an investment of 45 million euro in research projects on maritime activities.

Fisheries policy is also moving forward, with a new system in the making that clearly focuses on sustainability in all its aspects: environmental, social and economic. By moving decision-making away from Brussels, we will enhance the decision-making

role of local authorities like yourselves and make sure that the needs of regional and local communities are accounted for.

Rest assured that your involvement is only bound to increase with the upcoming reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, as is the role of bottom-up initiatives in favour of sustainability such as the Pact of Islands. I am thinking in particular of the development of coastal communities and the insertion into the wider maritime economy.

As for financing, the future financial instrument will only support projects that contribute to sustainability and to the Europe 2020 agenda: smart, innovative projects with green credentials that bring us out of the economic impasse and help build a different future for Europe's economy.

In sum, ladies and gentlemen,

I have every confidence that the Pact of Islands will focus minds, open up new opportunities for cooperation and spur cohesion and sustainable growth in insular regions.

A month ago I would have told you that, at this time of global recession, I welcomed your initiative. Today, having been made so brutally and acutely aware of the risks of nuclear energy, I jump at it. I do hope you and CPRM will bring your ideas to European Maritime Days in Gdansk next month.

Yours will not be the only contribution toward better governance; but I know it will be a significant one.

Thank you.