SPEAKING POINTS – OPENING SPEECH

• Ladies and Gentlemen,

• It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the 2013 Green Week!

• I am encouraged by the high interest that this year's theme is attracting.

• One can ask the question: can we afford to take time to discuss air quality?

• Europe is trying to move out of an unprecedented economic crisis. Many people - too many people - are losing their job. Poverty is on the rise. Confidence in the future is weak.

• We cannot avoid this crisis any more, but it would be unforgivable if we do not draw lessons from it. And one important lesson is about the sustainability of our behaviour.

• This crisis results from unsustainable growth fuelled by financial excesses. We borrowed to keep consuming and to
keep the economy going. With hindsight, we all know – now - that this was not sustainable.

- What is less widely accepted is that this same model of growth not only digs into our finite financial reserves, it also digs into the planet’s finite natural reserves.

- We seem to be locked in a system of production and consumption that relies far too much on taking far more than what we can give, and of what our planet can give…. We are running down our stock of natural capital – the water, air and other ecosystems on which we ultimately depend. We are indebting ourselves in an unsustainable way.

- Imagine this same resource-intensive system multiplied over and over to meet the needs of the additional 2 billion people foreseen to join us on the planet by 2050. In just one generation there will be more additional people on the planet than was the total population at the beginning of the 20th Century. This is the equivalent of 140,000 people per day. In just two weeks equivalent to the population of my own country Slovenia. All aspiring, and rightly so, to the same life style we enjoy today.
• I am not sure the equivalent of two planets would be sufficient to satisfy the needs and aspirations of everybody. If we continue using our resources at this same rate by 2050 globally we will need three times more material resource, and 70% more food, feed and fibre. And just in the next 20 years, we will need 40% more energy and water. This is simply not conceivable. Not due to the soft economic laws, but due to the hard laws of physics.

• We often think about the consequences in material resources. But what does it mean for this precious resource that determines life: the air that we breathe?

• Urban air pollution is set to become the world’s top environmental cause of premature mortality, overtaking dirty water and lack of sanitation. Air pollution concentrations in some cities, particularly in Asia, already far exceed World Health Organization safe levels, and they are projected to deteriorate further to 2050. Only 2 % of the global urban population are living within acceptable particulate matter concentrations below the WHO Air Quality Guideline.

• Is this a fatality? I do not believe it has to be.
• I believe we can engineer a transition to a more sustainable growth model. One where economic growth is decoupled from resource use.

• The issue of air quality is a good case in point. This is one of few areas where we have seen an absolute decoupling between economic growth and emissions.

• Last year we dedicated green week to water, this year we will discuss air. Two key resources our lives depend on. Two key resources we need to preserve. And I hope two key resources that make it easier to understand why it is so important to change the growth model that in many ways served us well in the past but cannot continue to do so in the future without change.

• We have a lot of success stories to tell when it comes to air quality in Europe and thanks to Europe. I would wish this Green Week to be celebrating those successes and exploring ways we can build on them. It is important to realise that we can tackle problems and that we often can do more and better if we work together across borders, across sectors, across ideologies.
• Yet we are still far from where we wish to be with air quality in Europe. I would want this Green Week to also inform us on the scale the outstanding problems, their importance on the health of our citizens and nature, and above all, to identify ways to address these problems.

• Air quality is a central concern for many people. A Eurobarometer survey told us that 80% of European citizens understand well the impact of air quality on health, especially cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, allergies and asthma. Citizens also understand the damage that is being done to the environment, with almost four out of five EU citizens worried about the effects of eutrophication, for example, through the growth of algae and the death of fish in lakes and rivers. And over 70% of citizens surveyed are asking public authorities to take action at EU, national and local levels, even in times of austerity and hardship.

• We are ready to respond to these concerns through the Air Quality Review, my political priority for 2013.

• I think that one of the reasons why people believe we can achieve something is that, as I have already mentioned, air
quality policy is something of a success story for Europe. It is a fact that the air we breathe today is much cleaner than in previous decades. We have almost eradicated the "acid rain" problem which was so prominent in the seventies and eighties.

• They see that air quality policy at national and EU level has delivered. The targets we set many years ago have been effective in driving innovation and in limiting air pollution.

• But, as also mentioned, we still have way to go to make sure that we achieve levels of air quality that do not strongly impact in a negative way on human health and on the environment.

• According to our latest data, more than 400,000 Europeans died prematurely from air pollution in 2010.

• This has a direct cost burden on healthcare, on companies through lost working time, and on the economy as a whole. We estimate that lost working days due to air pollution cost the European economy €12 billion a year in 2010. This puts additional pressure on already highly stretched public health budgets.
• Air pollution also puts a heavy burden on the environment. Two-thirds of the Natura 2000 sites are currently threatened by it, mainly through ammonia emissions from agriculture and nitrous oxide from combustion. Agriculture itself suffers from lost crop yield due to ozone damage, with impacts of around €3bn a year in 2010.

• The cost for society from air pollution is high, also in monetary terms. Our impact assessment work is telling us that the estimated external costs are in the range of €330-950 billion per year.

• Acting on air pollution is therefore not just an environmental and health concern, but also an economic imperative! More than a cost, it is an investment into a healthy and productive society.

• I am delighted that we have the opportunity of Green Week to discuss how we can make that investment.

• Let me try to inspire your discussions this week by outlining some of my thoughts about the direction we need to take.
• At the outset, there are four key objectives which I want to pursue:

• The first is to ensure full compliance with our existing air quality policies and our international commitments, by 2020 at the very latest;

• Secondly, to set clear targets for further improvements of air quality in the period beyond 2020;

• Thirdly, to propose an effective combination of measures to achieve these targets;

• And fourth, to open up opportunities for European business in the rapidly expanding markets for pollution abatement technology and services.

• For the first objective – to fully implement our current air policy – action must be stepped up to ensure that the legislation and policy already in place will actually deliver improvements to people where they live and work. We also need to make sure that different sectors contribute equitably – significant progress of some needs to be taken into account.
In the transport sector, the already agreed Euro Standards for cars and trucks should cut emissions as expected; and emissions from bulldozers, and excavators need to be reduced.

In the energy sector, we need to limit emissions from small scale combustion and consider additional initiatives for medium-scale combustion.

In agriculture, there is significant scope for better methods to limit harmful ammonia emissions.

In parallel, binding international commitments for 2020 are to be reflected in an upgraded National Emission Ceilings Directive.

The second objective involves setting out a clean air vision for beyond 2020. For the long term, the only credible vision, in my view, is "Zero Impact" – by which I mean no negative health effects, no eutrophication, and no acidification.
• In policy-makers' words, it would mean, for health policy for example, achieving all of the World Health Organisation's air quality standards.

• But we also need to set out a credible pathway for how to get there, in the form of intermediate policy objectives up to 2025 or 2030. This will involve designing a cost-effective strategy for reducing damage to human health or ecosystems from air pollution compared with the present situation. We are currently analysing how such objectives can be identified and achieved under a range of cost and benefit scenarios.

• The third objective is to identify concrete EU measures to reduce emissions where people live and work. An effective and cost-efficient emissions reduction policy is likely to include a revised National Emission Ceilings Directive with new emission ceilings for 2025 or 2030, complemented by source control measures at EU level where a common approach makes sense. Three main candidates are small-scale combustion, agriculture, and shipping.

• Finally, a few words about the fourth objective. Air pollution is becoming a serious problem around the world
– in Beijing, Bangkok, Manila and Mexico City as well as in Brussels and Dublin. The demand for low emission products and processes can be expected to increase dramatically. Air quality policy is therefore not only an environmental objective, but also an economic opportunity and a driver for innovation. A strengthened air quality regime in the EU will actually benefit European competitiveness. The US has been one of the leaders, and we can usefully learn from their experience.

- I want the policy package I intend to present in the autumn to set out how this can be achieved, combining a new air pollution strategy for the EU, tighter emission ceilings and specific source-related initiatives.
• Ladies and Gentlemen,

• Over this week, in almost 40 different sessions, we will learn about and debate almost all aspects of air pollution. We will address the health impacts and the underlying scientific evidence, the different sources of emissions, the cost and benefits to society, effective and innovative abatement methods for the pollutants, and how to inform the general public better to encourage them to get involved.

• We will hear from researchers, experts, policy makers, city representatives, regions, NGOs and industry, sharing experiences, providing new insights, and suggesting constructive ways to address the remaining challenges.

• The Green Week provides a unique opportunity for YOU to have your say in the on-going policy review. Your ideas are of great importance to me and my colleagues of the Commission in developing a renewed air policy for Europe. Your input will not only give us new insights, but will also provide a "reality check", which responds to people's concerns – public authorities, factory workers, farmers, decision-makers at all levels, and citizens at large.
• So, please air all your comments about air!

• There are many questions where we would appreciate your say. I take the liberty of raising four such questions at this point, in a random order:

  • Which sectors have done their homework and which are lagging behind?

  • What is best evidence that the action on air pollution should be taken at the EU level?

  • How do we best ensure mutual benefits from climate change and air quality policies?

  • How to design the measures so they boost innovation and create business opportunities for our companies?

• I wish you – and myself - a productive and interesting Green Week.

• I look forward to many sessions in which I will participate personally, and so are my colleagues who will be attending each and every one of them, listening carefully to your
views. We treasure Green Week, because we learn so much from you.

- But the Green Week also reminds us that we are many to treasure the environment. The force calling for a responsible and sustainable future. The force which cannot be ignored. This week is our week. And our message should be loud and clear: "We have the right to and we demand clean air."