

Speech Commissioner Dimas

The European Union and the new Water Strategy in the Mediterranean region

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Dead Sea, Jordan

*The text should be checked
against delivery*

Your Highness, Excellencies, esteemed delegates,

I am very glad to be here today at this important gathering devoted to water in the Mediterranean region, held under the high patronage of His Majesty King Abdullah II. Our thanks go first, of course, to our gracious Jordanian hosts, led by Minister Raed Abu Soud. We also thank our French EU President Minister Jean-Louis Borloo and Minister Mahmoud Abou Zeid of Egypt, who are co-chairing this Ministerial meeting.

Our gathering here today shows the great interest of the Euro-Mediterranean region in cooperating further on water issues. I am very pleased to be taking part in the Conference that will launch the process for defining a common strategy for water in the Mediterranean region.

Water scarcity and droughts are a major challenge facing the world and it is clear that climate change will make it worse and will lead to serious water shortages including in the Mediterranean region. The pressure on water resources resulting from global warming will be further exacerbated by increasing demand from growing population levels and per capita consumption. Urgent action is therefore needed to ensure a wiser use of our water resources.

A common strategy promoting the coordinated development of Mediterranean water resources would maximise socio-economic welfare and ensure that resources are shared in an equitable manner, without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems.

In this context, I would like to highlight several priorities for the European Commission.

We must not lose sight of the Millennium Development Goals relating to **access to drinking water and sanitation** agreed at the United Nations for the Mediterranean region. We have made progress but we are not yet there. This will require the mobilisation of renewed resources at national and international level. To that end, higher priority must be given to water objectives within the overall Sustainable Development Strategies on both sides of the Mediterranean.

In addition, water management is not only a question of having more access to water, but also making sure that the water is clean and is used efficiently. **Integrated water resource management** is needed because of heavy demands on limited water resources for a variety of needs – for drinking water, agriculture, industry, and sustaining healthy ecosystems. Integrated management is also needed to enable different regions and countries to share the

same resource. The need to find a sustainable, efficient and equitable balance between all uses, which is already a daunting challenge, will be further heightened by climate change.

The Mediterranean strategy has to be flexible and consider the different ways in which our societies are organised, to seek and adopt the most suitable way to ensure adequate **water governance**. This approach is reflected in the EU Water Initiative which was presented at the Johannesburg Summit on sustainable development. The Mediterranean component of this initiative, and in particular continuing national policy dialogues, can be useful in improving water governance. The continuation of the EU Water Initiative process can also facilitate access to financial resources from international institutions and financial support at national level.

Concerning governance, we must all learn from past experiences on water in our region, which have not always been successful. It is important to address any legislative gaps and institutional shortcomings, making sure there are no obstacles in the way to ensure efficient use and equitable distribution of water resources.

The new Water Strategy for the Mediterranean will also have to develop common objectives and joint actions on an emerging concern: **water demand management and water efficiency**. Agreeing on specific objectives on water efficiency and savings and devising together joint actions on water demand management will contribute to addressing **water scarcity and droughts**, and more generally adaptation to climate change. This must from now on be at the centre of our efforts, as the Mediterranean region is one of the areas most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

In the future, projects relating to water should focus increasingly on how to ensure the most efficient use of existing scarce resources and promoting best practice on water savings. Additional water supply infrastructures (such as water storage, water transfers or use of alternative sources) should be considered as an option when other options, including effective water pricing policy and cost-effective alternatives, have been exhausted. Tackling water scarcity and droughts also means focussing on the **integration of environmental concerns** in a range of economic sectors, such as agriculture where irrigation remains the main consumer of water, and industry.

These enhanced efforts with our Mediterranean partners will be made in parallel to those being carried out within the EU. The European Commission issued a *Communication on water scarcity and droughts* in 2007 and has just published a *report* showing the progress made by Member States in addressing water scarcity and droughts. While progress has been made a great deal still needs to be done to improve water demand management across Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the same time as focusing on quantity, we should also continue to give priority to improving the **quality of our water**. The new Euro-Mediterranean Water Strategy must therefore lead to concrete measures to tackle **water pollution**. Polluted water threatens to unbalance the natural ecosystem and –puts at risk the availability of safe drinking water. As water becomes more scarce as a consequence of climate change, pollution problems will increase.

Polluted waters also mean polluted seas. Pollution from land, for instance from wastewater discharged without treatment, continues to be the main source of concern in both freshwater and the Mediterranean Sea.

This is why our heads of State and Government agreed at the Paris Summit on 13 July that one of the major priority projects which will be pursued by the "Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean" will be the de-pollution of the Mediterranean.

The 3rd Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Environment in Cairo in November 2006 agreed on the form and timetable of the "Horizon 2020" initiative, which aims to de-pollute the Mediterranean by the year 2020 by tackling the main sources of pollution: urban waste water, solid waste and industrial emissions.

Dear friends,

Developing a renewed common Water Strategy in the Mediterranean will require us to address a series of issues, all of which are closely interrelated, and the tackling of these will be vital for the long term success of water management in the Mediterranean. It needs a new approach to water issues at national and regional levels..

The development of the Mediterranean water strategy is a challenging task that will be achieved only if it is based on an open dialogue among partners, which leads to the whole region adopting new approaches. All Euro-Mediterranean partners together with the European Commission have contributed to the preparation of this Conference and its success. But this is only a first step in the right direction. I trust that this constructive and participatory approach will continue in the further development of the strategy, and I look forward to working with all the Ministers here and all our partners in the years to come, to protect what I consider to be the most valuable resource in the Mediterranean region.

Thank you.