

Opening address to the Fourth Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention
By Ms. Astrid Klug, Parliamentary State Secretary on behalf of the Federal
Minister of the Environment H. E. Mr. Sigmar Gabriel
Bonn, 20 November 2006, 9.30 h

Excellencies,
Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to welcome you on behalf of Federal Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel to the 4th Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Water Convention in Bonn. Minister Gabriel regrets very much that he cannot participate in this conference himself. He sends his regards and wishes you all a successful meeting.

I am happy that the invitation to this conference has received such a positive response. This proves the interest in the joint and integrated management of water bodies in the UNECE and beyond.

The UNECE Water Convention is one of the most significant instruments for transboundary cooperation of states in the protection and use of water bodies. Today we can look back on 10 successful years of implementing this Convention. Executive Secretary Belka will address this in more detail in his speech.

The Federal Republic of Germany ratified the Convention very early on. As a country at the centre of the European Union, Germany shares five large international river basins with other countries: the Danube, Elbe, Oder, Maas and of course the Rhine, which also flows through the city of Bonn. Maybe you will find some time to take a look at the river during one of the breaks. It is only a few minutes' walk from this building.

In the river basins mentioned, Germany is cooperating with other countries, such as France, the Netherlands, Poland or the Czech Republic in international commissions. In some cases, the cooperation has existed for decades. You will find detailed information on some of these commissions in the poster presentation in the lobby. Besides water pollution control, flood protection plays a prominent role in their work. The reduction and prevention of flood damage is certainly a major challenge for the future, in particular in view of climate change. The devastating flood disasters of the past years, for example the flooding of the Danube River earlier this year, require joint planning and programmes, especially for large river basins. Flood protection is also one of the issues for which the UNECE Water Convention has established a special task force. This task force bundles the experience from different international river basin commissions.

The UNECE Water Convention has given important impetus to the establishment of the European Water Framework Directive. The preamble to this Directive underlines that it is aimed at contributing to the implementation of obligations under international conventions, notably the Water Convention. The implementation of the Water Framework Directive is one of the current and future priorities of transboundary cooperation in European Union water policy. The provisions of the

Convention are specified. Precise requirements are laid down for the EU Member States to improve the quality of their water bodies. The future management of water bodies in the EU is to be organised in river basin districts. This means that big rivers with their tributaries and the accompanying ground water are treated as ecosystem units. The goal is the achievement of a good status of all surface waters and of the ground water by 2015 if possible. This applies both to the chemistry and ecology of water bodies. With regard to ground water, quantity plays a role as well. In order to reach this goal, internationally agreed programmes of measures and management plans are to be developed, for the first time in 2009. The Directive attaches particular importance to the involvement of the public in the implementation process. The first steps towards implementation have already been taken. An assessment of the status and the pollution of all European water bodies was presented in 2005. At present, monitoring programmes are being devised in accordance with the provisions of the Water Framework Directive.

A great deal of knowledge and data derived from the implementation of this European Directive can be used for the further implementation of the UNECE Water Convention. For Germany, it is important to avoid duplication of effort and to intertwine the implementation of both instruments as far as possible in order to exploit synergies.

Together with the World Bank, the Federal Government has been involved in the so-called "Petersberg Process" for the transboundary management of water resources for several years. The joint management of water bodies is a catalyst for peaceful international cooperation. The Process, which was initiated in 1998, served as the basis for other events, for example a conference on transboundary water management in South-Eastern Europe in December 2005. The event helped to identify foundations and opportunities for further cooperation. Only last week the Federal Environment Ministry and the International Sava Commission held a workshop on river basin management under the Water Framework Directive. The workshop focused in particular on the use of rivers for shipping and hydropower.

Sufficient water quality and availability is a basic prerequisite for a healthy environment, for human beings, animals and plants. The Protocol on Water and Health which was adopted in the framework of the UNECE Water Convention contains important standards for drinking water supply and waste water management. It is a pleasure to inform you that Germany will shortly become a Party to this Protocol. We are looking forward to the first Conference of the Parties to this Protocol with great interest and we will be able to assist the Secretariat in its preparatory work, at least financially.

A number of key questions are on the agenda of this Meeting of the Parties and important decisions will be taken in the next three days. I would like to highlight two of the papers that are to be adopted.

The work plan for the years to come is of great importance. In my view, it lists many vital activities on numerous aspects of transboundary management of water bodies. The cooperation between the Water Convention and the Convention on the Prevention of Major Industrial Accidents in a joint expert group is only one example. Industrial accidents at water bodies can cause severe damage. Appropriate precautions and well-

functioning warning and alarm procedures are particularly important in this area. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Sandoz accident at the Rhine. During a fire in a Swiss factory in 1986, insecticides, pesticides and mercury were released into the Rhine with the fire water. This led to a massive decay of the flora and fauna of the river over hundreds of kilometres. The provision of drinking water from the river had to be stopped up to the Netherlands. Due to this disaster, the riparian states of the Rhine agreed on a joint action programme. For example, industrial enterprises along the Rhine enhanced the safety of their plants and wastewater treatment plants were built. The programme was clearly a success. Today the Rhine is again a living river, and even the salmons have returned.

We have to increase the awareness of the public, but also of the competent authorities, of the capacities of an ecosystem like a river basin. Ecosystems are the basis for economic and social development. For example, rivers provide drinking water. This is a service that has to be better understood and considered in decisions. Often, more money is invested in water infrastructure, such as filtering systems, than in the corresponding capacities of an ecosystem, for example by supporting bankside vegetation and its filtering function. I therefore think that the recommendations in the paper on the payment for ecosystem services, which is to be adopted at this meeting, represent an approach that is worth pursuing.

In view of the interesting topics on the agenda I regret that I will not be able to spend more time at this conference. I wish you all fruitful discussions and viable results, not only in the official sessions, but for example also tomorrow during dinner, to which I would like to cordially invite you.

Thank you very much for your attention.