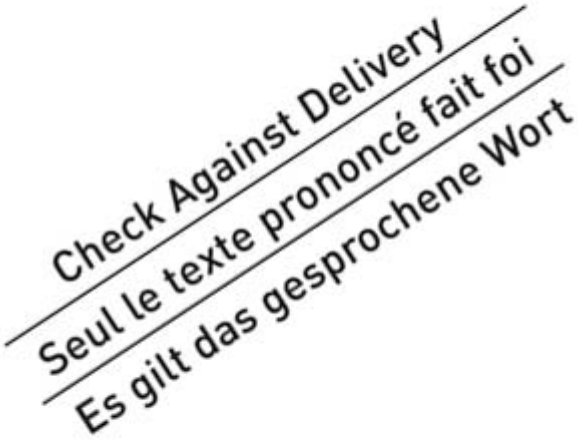
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Janez Potočnik

European Commissioner for Environment

Sustainable use of phosphorus



1st European Sustainable Phosphorus Conference - opening of the second day of the conference
Brussels, 7 March 2013

Spokespersons' Service
Service des Porte-parole

SPEECH/13/212

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Yesterday, a clear message was delivered on the importance of rapidly moving to more efficient use of phosphorus. Scientists, business, Ministers set out what needs to be done, and how we can do it by working together.

Today, I would like to focus on what we can do at the EU level to support this process. But let me start with why this issue is important.

Firstly is the objective of **resource efficiency.** In times of economic crisis, with resource costs for companies and consumers going up and up, it is essential that we look critically at how we are using our resources. Phosphorus is an excellent case study for resource efficiency. Here we have a valuable, life-sustaining resource. But instead of using it efficiently and recycling it, we turn it into a pollutant. And when we waste phosphorus, we are also wasting water and energy which are needed to dig up phosphate rock, ship it round the world and make a finished product.

Secondly, there are important **environmental implications** that affect the EU as a whole. In the recent Blueprint for Water, we highlighted that, despite progress, nutrient pollution problems persist or are increasing. We have to work together on these issues, as the Baltic Sea, for example, does not separate out the pollution coming from different countries.

We also need to protect our soil and ultimately our food, from the slow but insidious accumulation of cadmium. My colleague, Antonio Tajani is looking about setting levels for this substance in the revision of the Fertilizer Regulation, but recycling helps on two fronts by avoiding build up in our soils, and slowing down depletion of the cleaner sources of phosphate rock.

And thirdly, within the EU, **security of supply** is a serious issue. Although we have good trading relations with producing countries, we remain vulnerable to price volatility and to geopolitics. We already see a smaller percentage of rock being traded, as countries with reserves of phosphate rock increasingly integrate their production – selling us the finished product, but keeping the jobs. Better recycling would not replace imported rock, but it would reduce risks and offer new opportunities to our industries.

So, given this clear added value for EU intervention, what can we do?

Well, firstly we can help by giving phosphorus efficiency the attention that it deserves. The Commission has been working to see how we can raise awareness, state the issues clearly and invite stakeholders, Council and Parliament to actively participate. With a view to this, and as a follow up of the commitments made in the Resource Efficiency Roadmap, I hope to present a Green Paper on the issue in the coming months. In addition, this conference is a good opportunity to take this process forward.

It is not always easy to explain why we need to tackle what some may see as a longer-term environmental issue, especially in a time of economic hardship like today. It is true that supplies of phosphorus are likely to last for many years. But it is also true that we are already becoming victims of price volatility. That is a clear signal that waiting to deal with the problem is not a sensible option. And dealing with the problem today can help us save money tomorrow.

This is especially true for the resource efficiency type actions, as we are discussing here. They do not involve significant trade-offs between the environment and the economy. On the contrary, there are many EU companies, and knowledge institutions that see opportunities to create jobs and create growth by tackling resource efficiency of phosphorus. All around the conference yesterday you could hear businesses explaining the hard economic interest behind the actions they are taking, not philanthropy!

One area where the EU can clearly help, and an area that has a lot of promise in terms of wasting less phosphorus, is **agricultural efficiency**. It is easier and cheaper than ever for a farmer to know how much phosphorus the different animals and crops on the farm will need. The right dose at the right time avoids waste: waste of phosphorous and waste of money. Looking after your soil through crop rotation and maintaining soil organic matter also helps to avoid losses of phosphorus through soil erosion.

With the support available for rural development and agricultural research and innovation, farmers can have access to these technologies, techniques and opportunities. In terms of future innovation, the Innovation Partnership on Sustainable Agriculture should help bring a lot of the 'precision farming' type opportunities together. The challenge then is to get these opportunities more widely taken up on farms, and this is something that perhaps the farm advisory services can help with.

Coming to the **recycling and recovery options:** other speakers have gone further into this, but in essence there are three main areas with potential: manure, waste water and biowaste.

On **manure**, the Nitrates Directive is well adapted to encourage phosphorus recycling through limiting its losses into the aquatic environment. The Directive promotes manure efficiency. We have consistently sought to bring the best available science into our discussions with Member States on their nitrates action programmes. On processed manure in particular, we have made quite some progress - the key challenge is to have processed manure that can be transported, at least regionally, away from nutrients saturated zones and that can be used with precision to minimise nutrient losses.

On **waste water**, our recent Water Blueprint puts forward some interesting options such as the greater use of so-called "grey water" in agriculture, provided we can set the appropriate standards. The Innovation Partnership on Water will undoubtedly bring forward further possibilities, as they look at how the water industry can meet the challenges ahead. In time, we should move towards a more resource-based treatment of nutrients – at the moment we require removal of phosphorus from waste water, which deals with the pollution problem, but then allow in some cases the landfilling of what is removed, which does not really make the best use of the resource…

On **biodegradable waste**, if we can progressively phase out landfilling, this should help in recovery of this important source of phosphorus. In addition, together with our colleagues in charge of Enterprise and Industry, we are preparing standards for bio-waste to be used as fertilizers, which is closely linked to the revision of the Fertilizer Regulation. Recycled phosphorus is a major part of this so the revision should be very helpful to businesses looking to sell innovative products.

Finally, as an ex-research Commissioner, I should not forget that for all these streams, the EU supports a tremendous amount of research, innovation, and pilot schemes. You can hear about some of the work planned in programmes such as P-Rex at the conference, and we can see that a lot of progress is being made on how to take promising approaches and really roll them out into full scale facilities.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The recycling and sustainable use of phosphorous is an issue that is becoming more and more prominent in political and business discussions. I support this fully. But there is still a lot to do.

In the Commission we have our role to play: to get the message across on the economic and environmental importance of acting in time, to raise awareness, to ensure that our legislation is helpful. This conference shows that a lot of progress can also be made from the bottom up, by bringing individual motivated stakeholders together, to work together.

The challenge now is to move on, to take this successful event and use it to build structures and find solutions that really develop phosphorus recycling and its more efficient use. We should aim to have a market across the EU for the different forms of recycled phosphorus. We should aim for precision farming techniques to become standard across many different types of agriculture. We should aim to be using much more of this resource that is available to us in the EU.

None of this will happen overnight. That is all the more reason to start now. Let us make this conference the first step, and let us turn it into a journey that we all make together.

I wish you all a successful continuation of the conference.