

Facing the Air Pollution Agenda for the 21st Century

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Air Pollution in the 21st Century: priority issues and policy trends.

Your Majesty,

Mr Ambassador,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my very great pleasure to welcome you here today to the Fifth US-Dutch Symposium. It is my privilege to welcome Your Majesty. We are very honored that Your Majesty has accepted our invitation to attend the symposium this morning. Your Majesty's interest and presence here today and at the first of these US-Dutch International Symposia in 1982 underlines the importance of developing sustainable solutions to air pollution problems which will challenge us in the next century.

I wish to extend a very cordially welcome to the United States Ambassador to The Netherlands. This symposium is jointly organized by the United States Environmental Protection Agency and my ministry, The Netherlands Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment. The co-operation on environmental policy development between these two organizations is based on a Memorandum of Understanding signed 20 years ago between our two countries. I consider this co-operation to be very valuable. Over the years, contacts have been established at both policy and scientific level. And certainly in the area of air pollution, many fruitful contacts have been made.

The Netherlands wants to play a leading role in environment in the European Union. And so we have involved as many of the other EU Member States as possible in these symposia. I am pleased that the European Commission is represented here today by Mr

Enthoven from the directorate-general which is responsible for environmental matters.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the last 30 years, we have made progress in reducing air pollution.

In The Netherlands, a wide range of policy instruments has been formulated which have achieved the desired effect. These are the Air Pollution Act, emission guidelines, covenants with industry and various economic instruments. Since 1975, we have reduced sulphur dioxide emissions by 70% and lead emissions by 90%. Similar successes have been achieved in reducing CFC's and dioxins. However, emission reduction figures for many other substances are more modest. For example, we have only succeeded in reducing hydrocarbons emissions by about 30% compared with 1980. Yet, it should not be forgotten that these reductions have been achieved in spite of continued economic growth. Many air pollution problems persist because much progress in countering these problems is nullified by economic growth and especially growth in traffic. This indicates the nature of the challenge we are facing.

What are we doing this for? This is an easy question to answer. We are doing it for the health of people and of our planet. This is what motivates you as scientists and policy makers, and me as a politician to continue working to improve the quality of the air.

Clean air is a basic condition for health. Health is at issue especially with regard to ozone and particulate matter. Air pollution aggravates respiratory problems, and leads to an increase in sickness absenteeism, an increase in the use of health care services - more medication and hospital admissions - and even to an increase in pre-mature mortality. There are indications that air pollution is one of the contributing factors to the development of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and an increase in the number of people with these problems, for example, through chronic effects on the respiratory system and through interaction with the body's immune system. In The Netherlands, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is the third major cause of death after heart disease and cancer, and is in second place in terms of the incidence of disease and disorders. Because of these observations, air pollution is under intensive discussion in the

United States and in Europe.

In addition, clean air is necessary for a healthy environment and for maintaining the biodiversity. Acidification and photochemical air pollution are threatening our forests and vegetation. The presence of various persistent organic pollutants may very well threaten the biodiversity.

Another important target is the prevention of climate change. The international community is more or less in agreement that the increasing concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere since the industrial revolution has led to a gradual increase in the earth's temperature. We do not know yet what the consequences will be. That is the worst of it. But we do know that we cannot allow this to continue. That would be irresponsible, for example, for the countries that are not well protected from the sea, and also for future generations. In terms of the environmental consequences and social implications, the greenhouse problem surpasses all other air quality problems.

But before going into this problem, I want to say something about the immediate problem of air pollution in our cities, and especially the problem of increasing motor traffic.

I hope that during the present Netherlands presidency of the European Union, we can reach agreements on cleaner vehicles and cleaner fuels. This concerns particularly trucks, buses and cars which have an adverse effect on the air quality in our cities and towns.

Technologically, quite a lot can be done to improve the situation. We can use less fuel, we can introduce cleaner fuels, and we can do more about exhaust gases.

In the European Union, we will have to set new targets which industry will have to meet. In the last few months, I have heard from Ministers from countries with large automobile industries that they will support this. I hope that this attitude will gain wide spread acceptance in these countries and that this will lead to effective agreements at the Council of Ministers in June. Industry will then know what requirements they will have to meet in the future, for example in 2005. This will give certainty and also allow enough time to introduce the essential changes and adjustments.

In The Netherlands, we have decided that cars that pollute less will be taxed less.

Taxation will be reduced on cars which run on the most update and cleanest LPG installations. At the same time, we are working on stimulating a change over to LPG for city buses. Because diesel buses have an adverse effect on air quality and cause odor nuisance.

I am pleased that very soon the first electric cars for town use will be introduced to the market. Such technology can also count on favorable financial treatment. These cars are cleaner and therefore it is commendable that the automobile industry is going in this direction, even though slowly. In my opinion, government must be more active in stimulating these developments.

A few words about acidification and smog.

In Europe, we are developing a strategy to reduce acidification and photochemical air pollution. An air emission ceiling for each country in the European Union is being agreed, based on the carrying capacity of the environment and the contribution of each of the Member States to pollution. This is being done so that everywhere in Europe, a high degree of protection is offered against the lowest possible total cost to the European Union as a whole. This strategy is already being applied in the framework of the United Nations Treaty on cross-border pollution. The European Ministers have decided that the summer smog episodes with high ozone peaks must stop in Europe by 2005.

The problem of the greenhouse effect is top of my agenda. I am not dissatisfied with what we have achieved in the last ten years. Thanks to the efforts of scientists, we have a large degree of certainty about the reasons for the increasing greenhouse effect. A number of principle agreements have been reached, and most industrialized countries have started to adapt their energy policy accordingly.

In the area of climate change, there is good co-operation between the United States, The Netherlands and other EU Member States in the ongoing global negotiations. Such co-operation is fruitful as shown by the outcome of the first Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change in Berlin in 1995. On the other hand: The United States and The Netherlands differ of opinion on the speed and contents of measures to be taken.

The European Union has an important task to take a leading role in global decision making about the greenhouse effect. In December this year, a decision will be made in Kyoto on the target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions after the year 2000.

This is an important step forward because up until now, the target has been only to bring emissions back to 1990 levels.

Views on environment, however, differ greatly between the wealthy industrialized countries and the developing countries. The industrialized countries still consume by far the most but barely muster the political fist and effort to implement essential changes to protect the environment. The developing countries want more prosperity for their people, and rightly so. But in doing so, they must use fossil fuels. I see that the European Union has an important role to play in bringing these two extremes closer together.

At Kyoto, the European Union will pursue a reduction in greenhouse emissions of 15% by 2010 in relation to 1990 for the industrialized countries. A realistic, achievable and necessary goal. The United States also has a requirement that an increasing group of countries pledge themselves to limiting and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. I look forward with interest to the proposal of the United States to commit individually or jointly to a negotiating position similar to that of the European Union.

But we are not pessimistic about this. We all know new fuel systems are very interesting, both technologically and economically. Most oil companies would agree with me on this. The problem is that such investments do not lead to a short-term return. Thus government needs to become involved to enable new technologies to be introduced more quickly. This can be done through development subsidies but also through adjusting fuel prices.

Higher energy prices, however, do not mean that consumers have less money to spend. Such measures need to be introduced in combination with a reduction in income tax. We have already introduced a modest fuel tax in The Netherlands. The European Commission is also proposing such a tax on an European scale. It is a modest but nevertheless an important start.

We are now at the start of a new movement. In the last century economies and societies developed through increasing human productivity. In the next century they must develop

through increasing the productivity of fuel and natural resources.

It is economic growth which is stopping us from getting the problem of air quality under control.

But economic growth is essential. This is certainly so when we see hunger, sickness and poverty in a large part of the world. The wealthy countries are fortunate enough to be able to make choices about the direction of economic growth - whether to consume more and to increase mobility, or whether to act to benefit the quality of the living environment, health and climate!

Economic growth leads to extra income for government, for example, from the sale of natural gas and oil, company taxation, and duties and taxes on fuel. It is logical that we use some of this income on environmental policy. In this way, we can link the cause of the problem directly with its solution. In making this choice we are thinking not only of our own prosperity but also that of the generations to come.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The previous four US-Dutch International Symposia have made a valuable contribution to establishing a sound foundation for environmental policy development.

I trust that this symposium will provide a stimulus for taking up the challenges of the 21st century, and that it will contribute to continuing co-operation between the United States and The Netherlands - on environmental policy development.

In this expectation, I have pleasure in opening this symposium.

Thank you.