



Bundesministerium
für Umwelt, Naturschutz
und Reaktorsicherheit



Precautionary Flood Protection in Europe International Workshop

5 – 6 February 2003, Bonn

Preventive Flood Alleviation – an International Exchange of Expertise

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Workshop organised by Ecologic, Institute for International and European Environmental Policy
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| Überschrift/Titel: | Preventive Flood Alleviation - an International Exchange of Expertise |
| Untertitel: | |
| Redner/in: | Federal Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin |
| Anlass: | Flood Conference |
| Ort: | Bonn, 5 February 2003 |

Ms Schultz van Haegen (*Deputy Environment Minister of the Netherlands*)

Mr Bloech (*Representative of the EU Commission*)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted that our invitation to this conference on precautionary flood protection has attracted such a tremendous response. All of us here today have experienced at first hand the importance of flood alleviation – in the Netherlands, France and Italy, as well as in Poland, Austria and Hungary.

In Germany last August, more than 20 people lost their lives as a result of the flooding on the River Elbe. The direct damage to property amounted to almost € 10 billion. Neighbouring countries were also severely affected. Today, I would like to take this opportunity to **express our heartfelt thanks to everyone who so kindly came to our aid**, particularly the European Union and our Czech neighbours for their outstanding cooperation.

During the crisis last August, I flew to the Czech Republic to collaborate with our Czech colleagues and investigate whether the Spolana chemicals factory could pose a hazard to riparian proprietors along the Elbe in Germany. **This opportunity to cooperate beyond national boundaries was extremely important and reassuring for the people of Dessau and Dresden.** These positive experiences have made me confident that together, we will be able to develop and agree a European strategy to limit the risk of flooding.

In other words: **We need to tackle the root causes.** We have convened here today in order to jointly address a **problem which has been created by mankind itself:**

- the escalating frequency of so-called rainstorms is a consequence of **climate change**, for which we humans are largely responsible,
- flooding has not come to us, but vice versa: **we have chosen to move into the flood plains and build there**; on the Rivers Elbe and Rhine, only around 15-20% of the former flood plain now remains, whilst on the River Oder the figure is 25 %,
- we have forced formerly free-flowing **rivers into artificial riverbeds**, as a result of which the flow rate increases and the water level rises.

In consequence, precautionary flood protection entails a combination of long-term, medium-term and short-term strategies.

In the long term, the most important of these is climate protection. It is imperative for the Kyoto Protocol to enter into force as soon as possible. We are still waiting for Russia to ratify the Protocol. Last week, I had an opportunity to talk to the parliamentary representatives at the Duma about this matter. **I would call on representatives of other nations to use their contacts. We should all join forces in order to bring about a swift decision in Moscow, so that this December's Climate Conference in Milan can become the first Conference of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol.**

Over the next two days at this conference, we will be addressing **the medium and short-term strategies.**

There are **four points** which are pivotal to these strategies:

- **We need to give space back to the rivers.**

This is our only option if we are to win the race against the floodwater tides. In order to protect settlement areas which have become established over the course of history, unpopulated areas should be given back to the rivers to serve as natural flood plains.

Flood alleviation must become a paramount objective in the areas of water management, regional planning, agriculture and nature conservation. In this respect, there are numerous common interests.

- **Throughout the entire river basin, precipitation must be retained in a decentralised way so as to reduce the flow rate.**

From the source of the river to its mouth, the soil in river basin areas should be cultivated in such a way that rainwater seeps away as slowly as possible. At the same time, this will also have a beneficial effect on the groundwater table and drinking water supply. This is important, not only in the Mediterranean region, but also in Brandenburg, for example.

The **EU agricultural reform** planned by Mr Fischler could become a key aid. In particular, grassland operations will be highly valued under these plans. For this reason, we should endeavour to canvass support for the agricultural reform in our respective countries, and highlight the beneficial effects for flood alleviation.

It is important to **restrict new soil sealing**. In its national sustainability strategy and in the coalition agreement, the German Government has set itself the target of reducing new soil sealing to 30 hectares by 2020.

It is also important to **reverse river straightening** and recreate semi-natural conditions for rivers and streams. Measures to this effect are already included in the **European Water Framework Directive** of 2000.

- **We must control our urban development more effectively so as to minimise the damage inflicted in the event of flooding.**

At all costs, **the remaining flood plains** must be **preserved**. To this end, we need internationally binding regulations.

With rainstorms on the increase, in future, areas previously thought to be safe from flooding could become inundated. Dykes may rupture or flood. We must prepare the general public, the emergency services and the local authorities for such a situation. **Everyone must be aware of the risks** and take preventive action.

In such regions, oil tanks should only be used in locations which are absolutely flood-proof, or failing this, anchored to prevent them from floating up. This is only one example of many. Some regions will be forced to consider switching to alternative energy sources whose ecological consequences in the event of a disaster are less severe.

- **We need to improve our forecasting and early warning systems, and link them internationally.**

Today's conference is not only a forum for the exchange of expertise; it also aims to develop a working paper which will serve as a basis for the EU Working Group on Flood Prevention. **Towards the middle of this year, the EU Working Group will then submit a draft strategy.**

At international level, there is no need to start from scratch; instead, we can build on

- Our experiences of flood prevention in international river basins such as the Rhine

- The results of the **Budapest Conference of 1 December 2002**, where the Prime Ministers of the Danube's riparian states discussed the objectives and methods of joint flood alleviation.

At that time, the Prime Ministers stressed the need for a concerted European effort to alleviate flooding, and highlighted a number of key multilateral and bilateral mechanisms for water protection. The onus is now on us to implement and develop these measures consistently.

An action programme for the River Oder is now close to acceptance, whilst for the River Elbe, this autumn sees the launch of a flood action plan which has been revised in the wake of last August's experiences. Furthermore, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River has now reached a consensus.

From the outset, we must ensure that all affected countries are involved, including, for example, the candidates for accession.

It is crucial that we should abide by the principles of the Budapest Declaration, since sustainable development, prevention, partnership and solidarity constitute an excellent basis for European flood alleviation.

Amongst other things, the Budapest Declaration calls for

- An intensive **transfer of knowledge** and the **rapid application** of innovations in practical use. This is particularly applicable to water management and land use.
- Use of the UN-ECE **Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes** as a legal mechanism;

and I will be hosting a further specialist international conference in 2004 aimed at exploring these opportunities.

I have **high hopes** of the EU initiative for a European flood strategy.

However, we should not delude ourselves: The problem of flooding will continue to occupy us for many years to come. Take the Rhine, for example, just a stone's throw from today's conference venue. Back in 1998, the first international commission for river territories enforced a flood action plan for this watercourse. The plan is widely regarded as being exemplary. In spite of this, Cologne's historic old town is still subject to regular flooding because two Federal States, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, have thus far failed to put all the agreed flood polders in place.

Here in Germany, we need far more expertise at national level in order to implement international agreements of this kind. Upstream states are still able to redevelop at the expense of downstream states. To this day, we even lack uniform national regulations on precisely what constitutes flooding. **The EU Commission cannot do our homework for us.**

Whatever concrete format the national provisions in your respective countries may take, **the success of the EU strategy will depend to a large extent on whether it can be consistently and swiftly implemented in the individual states.** For this reason, a number of countries – and Germany is definitely one of them – need to achieve some substantial improvements at national level. **To this end, I am working towards a new framework law.** The considerations and experiences of this Conference will be incorporated into this process.

May I take this opportunity to wish you every success in your work.