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European Sustainable Phosphorus Conference

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Ladies and gentlemen,

In the past two days, many great minds have been gathering here to analyze the problem and discuss possible solutions for the Phosphorus Challenge. But *"knowing is not enough, we must apply. Willing is not enough, we must do"*¹. Now is indeed the time to act upon the sense of urgency that exists.

The numbers have been mentioned several times: In the next 40 years, the earth's population will grow with another 2 billion people; the demand for food will increase with 70%; and the phosphorus stocks will continue to decrease.

¹ Leonardo Da Vinci

This is therefore an issue that affects the whole of humanity.

Many ideas have been proposed in the past two days. People from all corners of Europe have presented their work. Some discussed the recycling issue, some talked about efficiency in the use of phosphorus, others were focused on mitigating the pollution aspect of this issue.

But what we have to take away from this conference, is that the final solution will not be a 'one-shot' solution. No, it will be a matter of "all of the above". It will be a solution that incorporates all the different aspects of this issue.

As you have noticed during this conference, Flanders is a front runner in this field. Our region in the heart of Europe has a lot of expertise to offer. Expertise that we have gathered out of necessity. As a small urbanized region, our agriculture is highly intensive.

This means that, for many years already, we have been working on solutions to cope with the phosphorus supply and pollution.

Today, the Flemish waste management is one of the most efficient in Europe. This is a consequence of the fact that we already have very strict regulations when it comes to nutrient management.

But good is not good enough. We continue to strive for even better materials management. We are working hard on an economy of closed material cycles through our Sustainable Materials Management program.

This program is one of the key priorities within Flanders in Action. Flanders in Action is a visionary program that has to lead us to the top 5 of European regions by 2020 in an array of social, ecological and economic fields. In fact, Flanders in Action shows striking similarities with EU 2020, even though our program was launched several years before EU 2020.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our Sustainable Materials Management program brings together key people and organisations from all stakeholders. Government, industry, research institutions and civil society work together on concrete projects that truly make a difference.

But we are very well aware that we cannot solve the Phosphorus challenge on our own. A European challenge demands European solutions. Our expertise is very large, but we are not the only region in Europe that has this expertise. That is why all regions and member states with this kind of expertise have to work together in tackling the issue.

That is what smart specialisation means. It means that the ones with the best assets to tackle an issue, do so across borders and in close cooperation. Flanders and the Netherlands have already set up networks for cooperation. They meet on a regular basis to pinpoint certain actions they can jointly take.

But in order to succeed, the cooperation has to become broader. This European Sustainable Phosphorus Conference is an important step in the right direction. I therefore want to thank and congratulate the 18 organisers with this terrific conference. I do hope that this conference will be the starting point of a European Phosphorus Platform.

At the same time, I urge the European Commission to seize this moment and work towards a real European solution for this issue. I urge the Commission to actively support the regions that want to cooperate. Moreover, the Commission should work on uniform rules on recycled phosphorus so that a real European market for this product can take form.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With great challenges come great opportunities. This is no different for the Phosphorus Challenge.

What we have to do now, is stimulate those that want to innovate. Because this innovation can not only solve the problem, it can also create profitable business opportunities.

This is, in short, what the New Industrial Policy of the Government of Flanders is about. Through this policy, we stimulate industry to innovate and to transform itself into Factories of the Future. In order to do this, companies have to become greener, more creative and more competitive.

The government provides the right framework and the necessary means to boost innovation. But it is up to the industry itself to come up with the right ideas to move forward. I am sure that the New Industrial Policy can also provide opportunities for companies working on the Phosphorus Challenge and I therefore invite them to learn more about this policy.

Together we can truly make a difference. We can find solutions, overcome this challenge and grasp the opportunities that arise. So that one day, we can look back and realize that our generation took its responsibility and solved once and for all the Phosphorus Challenge.

I thank you.