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Commissioner for Environment
Oceans and Fisheries

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Ms Stientje van Veldhoven
Minister
Ministry of Environment and Housing

Ms Carola Schouten
Minister
Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality

Ms Cora van Nieuwenhuizen
Minister
Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management

Dear Ministers Van Veldhoven, Schouten and Van Nieuwenhuizen,

Thank you very much for your letter of 18 December 2019 and your encouraging messages.

I have taken good note of the issues you have raised and the suggestions you have made to further enhance the EU's environmental and climate ambitions. These suggestions will duly feed into our discussions, but I would nevertheless like to use this opportunity to make a few observations on the Commission's priorities under my responsibility in relation to the points you have raised, and with particular relevance for the Netherlands.

As you well know, this Commission came very early in its mandate with the European Green Deal. We consider this to be our path not just to sustainability, but to a Europe in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. The Deal was adopted just a few days after the European Environment Agency (EEA) published the State of the Environment Report SOER 2020, which was a wake-up call. It told us that Europe's environment is at a tipping point, and that despite the significant progress of the past two decades, our efforts have been too little to reverse negative trends. The Green Deal turns that around. It is Europe's new growth strategy, with sustainability and social justice at its heart signalling that it is time to rethink the whole approach.

Indeed, we need deep and transformative change as soon as possible, tackling the unsustainably drivers at source, notably in our production and consumption systems. The EU Green Deal sets out a few clear lines for that.

The first one, also mentioned in your letter, is the zero pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment. There will be two major components: a self-standing *Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability*, to improve protection for citizens and the environment, and to encourage innovation, so we can develop alternatives that are safe and sustainable, as well as an *Action Plan for air, water and soil*, setting out the steps we need to follow. We need to prevent pollution before it happens, and remedy the pollution that is already there.

As regards your specific request on PFAS, I can confirm that the Commission has already taken action to address the concerns they pose for human health and the environment. We are running two preparatory studies for a possible restriction on the uses of the whole PFAS group in fire-fighting foams and in textiles. At the December Environment Council, I have heard that the Netherlands intend to prepare a dossier to restrict all non-essential uses of PFAS under REACH. The Commission supports this action and is ready to collaborate to the preparation of the dossier, also using the expertise of the European Chemicals Agency. Moreover, the Commission has proposed a new Drinking Water standard for the whole PFAS group and has recently organized a workshop on analytical tests. The PFAS that are most persistent in the environment have been proposed for the potential review of the Groundwater Directive annexes. Beyond these, I believe that we need a more comprehensive approach to PFAS, going beyond a REACH restriction and regulatory actions under water legislations. The new chemicals strategy for sustainability will allow us to address PFAS in a more holistic way with a concrete action plan.

Second, this spring will come with a new *Circular Economy Action Plan*, which will be presented together with the EU Industrial Strategy. The first plan, five years ago, was a huge success, with all 54 actions completed on time. Now we are building on that success, with the ambition to take circularity to the mainstream. We need widespread transformation, and we need it in the industries where the footprints are really large. The focus will therefore be on sectors where the impact is very high, like textiles, construction, plastics and electronics. The aim is to look at the whole lifecycle of products. At the top of the list is preventing waste generation followed by transforming the remaining waste into a useful resource.

We are also planning a new framework for sustainable products. The Green Deal is all about transformative change, and for that to happen, green products have to become the norm – at prices the people can afford. It has to become a part of life. So the framework will be very broad, addressing all products placed on the EU market, with a view to extending their lifetime, giving consumers a new right, a true 'right to repair' and reducing the impacts derived from manufacturing and use. Consumers are a vital part of the transformation, but they need better information about the reparability and durability of products. We also want to help by tackling misleading green claims. Not least, the Stakeholder platform, which has helped building a community of practice since 2017, will continue being a priority.

A third critical element is the new *Biodiversity Strategy*. What we want to see is ambitious and realistic commitments, such as more effective nature protection, and a plan to restore ecosystems to health, including forests. It will come with an enabling framework to spur transformative change, and ensure that we integrate a concern for ecosystems and all they deliver across all economic activities. These are the principles that we will be taking to the Nature COP 15, the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Kunming, China in October this year, as you kindly support in your letter. We need the world on board, and for that to happen, we have to lead by example.

As regards Oceans and Fisheries, the IPCC special report on the Ocean and the Cryosphere is clear: oceans are at the heart of the climate emergency, among the first victims in line. Sea levels rise, temperature increases, acidification, migration of fish stocks, dying of coral reefs, destruction of fragile ecosystems. Entire communities dependent on these are at risk. Nevertheless, oceans are also a solution. Marine renewable energy has an incredible potential. The offshore wind sector is growing strongly enough to compete with traditional energy sources. The emerging technologies such as wave and tidal energy will take the same pathway. Already by 2030, renewables should provide at least 32% of the EU overall energy consumption. Algae can bring high nutritional value at a low environmental impact, and when processed as biofuels or bioplastics, they turn their petrochemical alternatives obsolete. The marine food sector can contribute to a net zero economy.

Fish from aquaculture has in general a much lower carbon footprint than animal proteins from land sources. Fisheries and our fishing communities also have a crucial role to play. Sustainability in fisheries serves both our planet and our fishing communities who deserve a chance to reap real economic rewards. Success stories show us that stocks that have been overfished can recover thanks to the ambitious actions taken.

Another essential element of the EU Green Deal I will also contribute to is the future *“Farm to Fork” Strategy on sustainable food*. Indeed the current food system is not sustainable as highlighted also by the SOER 2020 report of the EEA, and we need to tackle this systemic problem across the whole food value chain with a holistic approach.

It is clear that all these policies will need to be supported and applied by our Member States. The Netherlands can play an important role in shaping these policies, given its active approach and in many cases, advanced experience in these fields. Your experience in dealing with flooding or air pollution in big cities could well serve other Member States, especially in the context of the current climatic challenges.

On the other hand, solutions need to be found to pressing environmental issues in The Netherlands.

This is the case for the nitrogen deposition from economic activities, including agriculture and transport, which is causing biodiversity loss against the background of high population density. I am convinced that sound solutions will be found to ensure that various economic activities do not harm water and nature and instead preserve the biodiversity patrimony for the next generations. This is the essence of sustainability. The prolongation of the current derogation under the Nitrates Directive should also be considered in the context of these pressures, and enforcement efforts need to deter fraud effectively. My services are ready to continue offering the appropriate assistance in this regard.

I look forward to confirming our exchanges and cooperation on the above-mentioned topics.

Yours sincerely,

Virginijus Sinkevičius

