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Janez Potočnik EU commissioner environment annual benefit €50 billion EU

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Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik

ACCORDING JANEZ POTOČNIK EU-COMMISSIONER ENVIRONMENT FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF EU ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION WILL BRING AN ANNUAL BENEFIT OF €50 BILLION IN EU. In his column for duurzaamplus.nl Janez Potočnik pleads for a revolution: “We need to move from a linear economic model, where we extract, produce, use and throw away, to a circular economy model, where waste from one stream becomes the raw materials for another.

Another Netherlands every 3 months

The environment has not been on the front pages in recent years. It would seem that there have been more ‘urgent’ things to deal with. But unless we protect the environment and our natural resources, unless we change the way we produce and consume goods, and unless we change the way our economies are set up, we will end up in much deeper trouble than we are now.

We cannot ignore what is happening on our planet: The global population will rise to more than nine billion by the middle of the century. Every day there are 200.000 more of us on Planet Earth – that’s like adding another Netherlands every three months. With all the additional food, water, fuel, land and infrastructure needs that come with it.

Ecosystems degraded

But it’s not just extra people – we are consuming more per person too. By 2030 the demand for food, feed and fibre will rise by 70 per cent. Yet already more than half of the ecosystems these resources depend on are degraded, or used beyond their natural limits.

It is clear that instead of viewing our environment either as a limitless source of materials, or as an external challenge to be dealt with separately, we must learn to work with it. To those who tell me that the hard laws of economics mean that we must continue to drive up production and consumption to meet new demands I say this: Pretty soon we will find that the soft laws of economics are increasingly hitting against the hard laws of physics, as we hit supply constraints, tipping points and planetary boundaries.

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Environment

In Europe as we struggle out of crisis, we have to understand that our future growth and jobs are wholly dependent on what our environment can provide. We are a densely populated continent and we use so many resources. Half a billion Europeans use on average sixteen tonnes of resources per person, per year, whilst generating nearly six tons of waste, and nearly half of that ends up in landfills. Those resources and the energy we use are getting more and more expensive and Europe is highly import dependent for many materials and for energy. We import more than half of all the materials we use and we import six times more materials than we export.

Janez Potočnik: wake up call to a reality

So, for Europe, embarking on a less resource-intensive growth path is a competitiveness issue as well as an environmental one. We need to wake up to a reality where the economy and the environment go hand in hand. We need a new revolution, based on two things: Firstly, yes, we need to get more value out of each ton

of materials, each joule of energy, each hectare of land and each cubic meter of water. But the second thing we must do is re-use, update, repair and recycle. We need to move from a linear economic model, where we extract, produce, use and throw away, to a circular economy model, where waste from one stream becomes the raw materials for another.

Learn from Nature

We should learn from Nature, the most complex circular economy based on millions of years of experiences and adaptation. We are part of nature. Destroying it would be destroying our self and our own future. But nature can teach us about sustainability for our economies and our competitiveness too. This is what has guided me in my four and half years as EU Commissioner for Environment. But for me, it has been just as important to make sure that environmental issues are integrated into 'other' policy areas.

EU commissioner Environment

I have made many significant proposals on water, air, waste and nature, as well as taking countless enforcement actions against Member States, during my mandate. To take just one example, the EU adopted a new biodiversity strategy setting six main targets, and twenty actions to help Europe halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services by 2020. We were instrumental in securing international agreement at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 2010, which included the adoption of 20 global targets.

The Commission introduced resource efficiency as a priority in the EU's 2020 strategy which provides a long-term framework for actions in many policy areas including energy, transport, industry, agriculture, fisheries, research and regional development. Of course it has been frustrating at times, especially when faced with the false argument that economic growth must take precedence over 'environmental regulation'. On balance, however, I think we have made real progress.

Benefit €50 billion

A study done under this Commission has showed that full implementation of EU environmental legislation will bring an annual benefit of €50 billion at EU level. That is an enormous sum, and we are talking about direct benefits in terms of growth, jobs and wellbeing across the continent. We must realise that it is impossible to deal with environment as a separate issue. I hope my successor will follow this path to move Europe towards more circular economy and help guarantee that our children will no longer need to ask a question: "do we choose economic growth or environment?" It is either both or nothing.

Janez Potočnik

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