European Conference on Plastics in Freshwater Environments" conference

21 – 22 June 2016, Berlin

Welcome address by Ms Barbara Hendricks, Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety, Germany

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to open this conference. As I am sure you know, Germany is active in the field of tackling marine litter, on the international level too. Marine litter is a very graphic example of how badly we humans are treating our environment.

If there is litter in our oceans, it is only logical to address the issue of litter in our inland waters. I am delighted that this expert conference is focussing on the topic of plastics in freshwater environments in a European context.

There is now a global realisation that we have to reduce the amount of plastic waste entering our seas and oceans. The public is becoming increasingly aware of this issue and is rightly calling for measures to be taken to protect the marine ecosystem.

Plastic littering in seas and oceans comes from a range of sources. There is no doubt about the entry of plastic waste from on land.

To prevent this input we need a structured waste management system from collection to recovery or disposal in appropriate facilities.

In Germany and many other EU member states we have already made great progress in this area. Other countries and regions need to catch up, and they need our support to do so.

The latest legislative measure by the European Union aims to tackle the problem of plastic bags, which are a particularly prominent source of marine litter. A new EU directive from last year prescribes that the consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags has to be reduced to a maximum of 40 per person and year by the end of 2025. In Germany, consumption is currently 71 bags per person; the European average is 198 bags per person and year.

The entry of plastic bags into waters in Germany can be practically ruled out. They are collected and recycled or recovered for energy, either in the yellow bins or in some cases together with residual waste.

Despite this, we have to do more to take a stand against wasteful resource use. This is the goal of a voluntary agreement that I concluded with the German Trade Association.

The companies taking part have pledged to charge for all plastic bags used in their shops in future.

There is also no doubt that rivers are a major input route of marine litter. Plastic waste collects in river basins and is then transported further. Plastic waste decomposes into smaller and then tiny particles, in other words microplastics. Microplastics also come directly from other sources.

However, we do not yet have enough data and findings to assess the scale of rivers as input routes and to be able to take effective countermeasures.

Initial studies indicate that over 60 percent of plastic waste in oceans and seas enters them via rivers. We need to study this in more detail, with more representative tests and using uniform benchmarks.

The findings of studies so far vary and are not really comparable. There is still a lack of jointly harmonised procedures and standards.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The conclusion of a recent study by Basel University is that as far as microplastics are concerned, the Rhine is one of the world's most polluted rivers.

I come from the Lower Rhine area, which is reason enough for me to be shocked by this.

So far only few major rivers have been covered by comprehensive studies. Findings for major rivers in Europe can be counted on one hand: the Rhine, Danube, Rhône and Po. In addition to this there have been surveys of several Central European lakes.

Studies have also been carried out in Germany. You will hear more about these during the conference. The German Research Ministry has been active on the issue of marine litter for many years and has recently expanded its focus to cover plastic in inland waters.

Thanks to the studies that have been carried out we know that microplastics can be found in the water, sediment and on the banks of inland waters. This is certainly not a recent development, but the discussions on marine litter have now drawn attention to pollution in inland waters too.

The origin of microplastics is often unclear. This is due to the fact that it requires major analytical effort to identify these tiny particles and that they can only rarely be assigned to a source. Sewage treatment plants release microfibers into waters, for example resulting from abrasion when washing fleece jackets and other outdoor clothing.

The fact that microplastics are found in exfoliating products is well known, but they are also found in liquid soap. Particles from car tyres and plastic surfaces on sports areas can also be found in waters, as can plastic pellets from car wheel washing machines. Studies on the Fulda, Werra and Saale rivers have revealed this.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These are all small partial flows, but they are large in total. A Swedish study published in March presented an impressive compilation of the known sources of the input of microplastics, analysing many other studies in the process.

And that is exactly what this conference is about. 22 countries are represented here.

We have to share our experiences and pool our knowledge. Together we have to draw the right conclusions and decide on the next steps.

The discussions on marine litter can serve as a model, especially the work of the G7. Under Germany's presidency, an action plan was adopted in 2015 at the Elmau G7 summit that can be considered the political launch of a global fight against marine litter.

It addresses input sources on land and at sea, and the aspects of removing the litter, research and public relations work. The heads of state and government share the opinion that this urgent problem can only be solved in close partnership.

There is also a need for discussion at national level. In March I established a round table on marine litter. In cooperation with experts from authorities, the fishery and tourism sectors, industry and trade, the scientific community and environmental associations, we are aiming to coordinate national measures and advance their implementation.

I believe it is very important to bring together experts on oceans and inland waters for talks. Germany is at the heart of Europe and is part of 8 international river basins that lead either to the North Sea or Baltic Sea. This is why both saltwater and freshwater are significant for us.

I am delighted that several members of the international commissions on protecting the Meuse, Elbe and Rhine rivers are here today.

A joint workshop is planned with river basin commissions and OSPAR. In some cases, countries and stakeholders in river basins are already taking action. These are all good approaches that we can make use of.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Every one of us uses plastic every day. Plastic goods can now be found in even the most remote corners of the globe. Sooner or later, plastic turns into plastic waste. This is why we need consumers on board as well as experts so we can work with them to effectively protect ecosystems.

Of course, we won't be able to reach a stage where all households can reduce the waste they produce per year to the contents of a glass jar like the young couple from Bochum that was recently in the papers. They aim to avoid all kinds of waste, almost completely rejecting any kind of packaging and composting all biowaste.

It goes without saying that this isn't a realistic model for the whole of Germany. But it does show that responsible waste management is an option for everyone. We have to promote this - all over the world, in all sections of society and across all age groups.

There are often waste collection campaigns for rivers, and the public is often actively involved.

We need such campaigns to become more systematic in order to reduce plastic waste in waters. This is also the goal of OSPAR and HELCOM action plans on this issue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The younger generation especially is aware of the problem of waste.

The marine conservation organisation Project Blue Sea has just published a children's book about a pool cleaning robot. On a journey through streams and rivers to the sea he discovers that water isn't always as clean as in his pool.

The book is part of a project geared towards teaching children more about the issue.

More education, information and joint action, and more detailed exchanges for a clean environment - this is in our interests and in the interests of future generations.

I am delighted to see you all here in Berlin and wish you a successful conference.