

Address

by

**Fergus O' Dowd, T.D. Minister of State at the Department of the
Environment, Community and Local Government**

at the

**International Conference on Prevention and Management of Marine
Litter in European Seas,**

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Introduction

Minister Altmaier, Commissioner Potočník, Honourable Member of the European Parliament (Matthias Groote), Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

I would like to start by thanking Minister Altmaier and Commissioner Potočník for organising this important conference on marine litter and for inviting me to speak here today on behalf of the Irish Presidency of the European Environment Council.

Why are we here in Berlin today, and why should we be concerned about marine litter? Well, there are a number of reasons. At one level we should view our oceans and seas as a valuable resource, supporting a diverse European marine economy, with huge importance for food production, and with vast potential for tourism, energy and new applications for health, medicine and technology.

The recent EU commissioned Blue Growth study estimates that the Gross Value Added of maritime economic activities in the EU-27 amounts to €495 billion per year.

From my country's point of view, having regard to the extent of Ireland's seabed area, Ireland is the third largest EU State in the North Atlantic, with a seabed territory of approximately 880,000 square kilometres; over 10 times our landmass. The Irish Government is determined to ensure that Ireland's ocean potential will be a key component of our economic recovery and sustainable growth, generating benefits for all our citizens.

In parallel, our seas give us many non-commercial benefits; for example amenity, biodiversity and climate regulation. Marine ecosystems are home to a rich and diverse range of species and habitats; these are

important in their own right and we must protect them. There is also a growing recognition of the importance to society that ecological goods and services provide for health, social, cultural and economic needs.

The protection of our oceans and seas is an essential requirement of our ecologically sustainable future and must be seen as a key component for a thriving and sustainable maritime economy.

The Problem of Marine Litter

Marine litter is a persistent problem that affects the entire marine environment; the seabed, the water column and coastlines. While its ecological effects are not always fully understood, there is growing evidence of detrimental effects on wildlife and habitats and on marine biodiversity. It poses risks to a wide range of marine animals, such as seabirds, marine mammals and turtles through ingestion and entanglement, and it has financial impacts on a range of economic sectors, for example aquaculture, tourism and fishing.

Up to 80% of marine litter is plastic which, because of its low density, can float and can be carried across seas and oceans by wind and tide. Plastics degrade very slowly, over hundred-year time scales, and are prone to breaking up into small particles. All the plastic that has entered the marine environment remains there to date, either as whole items or as fragments.

Marine litter is a global issue that cannot be solved by any country acting alone. We share the planet and we share a common responsibility towards current and future generations. At Rio+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Ministers, including EU Ministers, renewed their commitment to sustainable development and to

ensuring the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet, for present and future generations.

Ministers committed to take action - based on collected scientific data - to achieve significant reductions in marine litter by 2025 to prevent harm to the coastal and marine environment.

We must now live up to that commitment. This conference provides real opportunity to begin this important work.

I would like to commend the conference organisers for the initiative they have taken; thank them for raising awareness of this important issue and also thank them for the opportunity and challenge they have presented to us all.

What are to be the Next Steps?

Actions will be needed at different levels to address the problem of marine litter. These will most likely include a mix of national measures, regional or sub-regional measures and EU-wide initiatives.

As a starting point, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive already requires EU Member States to establish targets and indicators and, by 2014 to put in place monitoring programmes to quantify trends in the amount of litter in the marine and coastal environment, with the aim of reducing inputs and guiding progress towards achieving good environmental status.

Recognising that marine litter does not respect national boundaries or jurisdictions, efforts towards good environmental status for marine litter can only be strengthened through coordinated action at regional (or sub-regional) seas level.

I therefore welcome the actions underway by Regional Seas Conventions relating to marine litter presented earlier during this conference.

Ireland is a Contracting Party to the OSPAR Convention for the Protection of the North-East Atlantic. At Bergen in 2010, OSPAR Ministers committed to strengthen our efforts to combat adverse impacts on the marine environment originating from human activities, including those resulting from the introduction of marine litter. We have agreed, as part of the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy, to establish regionally co-ordinated targets and monitoring programmes for marine litter; we also agreed to work together to develop appropriate programmes of measures to reduce amounts of litter in the marine environment, both from sea-based and land-based sources.

I believe that OSPAR Contracting Parties, and also Contracting Parties to other Regional Seas Conventions, have much to gain - and will bring added value to their efforts - by working collectively to address the problem of marine litter.

Ireland commits its full support for the approach set out in the 'OSPAR checklist on Marine Litter' - presented here at this conference - to develop a Regional Action Plan with a focus on bringing forward concrete actions to deal with marine litter in a way that allows us assess progress towards achieving the objectives of the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy

A key priority for the Irish Presidency in the field of environment is to achieve a First Reading Agreement with the European Parliament on the 7th Environment Action Programme (7th EAP). The 7th EAP sets out a strategic agenda to guide EU environment policy up to 2020. The

programme sets out a framework to support the achievement of nine priority objectives through better implementation of EU environment law, state of the art science, securing the necessary investment in support of environment and climate change policy, and improving the way that environmental concerns and requirements are reflected in other policies.

The current text of the 7th EAP includes the proposal to '*establish an EU-wide quantitative reduction target for marine litter.*' There are differing views among Member States regarding the practicalities of setting EU-wide reduction targets. Concerns have been expressed regarding the availability of a sufficiently comprehensive baseline and the current availability of 'fit-for purpose' monitoring programmes to detect trends and measure compliance. There are of course also sound reasons that favour setting an EU-wide target; most notably, the clear policy direction that it provides.

It is however not the role of the Irish Presidency to decide this matter. Discussions on the 7th EAP are currently taking place between Member States at Environment Working Party level. Later in the negotiation process the Irish Presidency will be engaging with the Parliament and the Commission and negotiation will culminate in a number of trilogue meetings in the latter part of the Irish Presidency.

We will work hard to achieve an agreed position on this matter and remain confident that a First Reading Agreement on the 7th EAP can be achieved by the Irish Presidency.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to thank each and every one of you for your input to this important work during this three day conference. I look forward to discussions on the outcome at the next meeting of Marine Directors which will take place in Dublin at the end of May under the Irish Presidency.

I wish you well in the follow-up steps.

Thank you.