

Mr Chairman, Minister Kupfer,  
Mr Kuhl, Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank Mr Kuhl for hosting this conference on behalf of Saxony and Minister Kupfer for his enthusiastic support. I am sure today's proceedings will provide a much needed insight on soil remediation activities across some of the most active regions of Europe. It will highlight not only the close connection between a proactive soil protection policy and the existence of a thriving soil remediation industry, but also set the foundations for some of the work Europe will need to do to manage its land better.

For the future, land management and water management are cited among the biggest challenges for the mankind. In the EU itself, every year more than 1000 square kilometres are subject to 'land take' for housing, industry, roads or recreational purposes. About half of this surface is actually sealed. In many regions soil is irreversibly eroded or has low organic content. Soil contamination is a serious problem. The competition and pressures on land and soil are difficult and costly to reverse. And for all these reasons, a comprehensive approach to soil proves to

be even more necessary, and only strategies will not be enough to reach our objectives.

I will not repeat all the arguments that the Commission has been putting forward since 2006 in favour of a European policy on soil protection. They are as valid and pertinent today as they were then. It is no mystery that I believe that EU legislation is a fundamental cornerstone of that policy and I will continue working for its adoption in Council.

On this, maybe Minister Kupfer for the moment may not entirely agree with me. But where we surely agree, is that experience shows that a strong and proactive policy and legislation in favour of the identification and remediation of contaminated sites, inevitably brings with it the development of know-how, technologies and expertise. These can then be used by entrepreneurs for developing an industry, creating jobs and offering business opportunities. It brings better infrastructure and land use planning.

Indeed, on the basis of 2004 data, 22% of the turn-over of the remediation industry in EU-27 took place in Germany, 20% in the Netherlands and 17% in Denmark (the three together almost

60%), while only 6% each in France and the United Kingdom. My impression is that these numbers approximate the level of policy attention to the issue and a legal framework geared towards *proactive* soil remediation, as opposed to a *reactive* mode that is mainly triggered by manifest contamination phenomena or economic opportunity.

Incidentally, I am quoting figures from 2004 - because one of the consequences of a lack of a common and binding approach to soil protection in Europe is, that we do not have more recent data and we have to rely on the results of past studies.

Today's presentations from Saxony, Germany, Denmark and Northern France will highlight that the pollution legacy of a long gone industrial past doesn't need translating into a stagnation of the economy and parallel social decline, but can be tackled with determination, in cooperation with local partners and city authorities, to offer new development opportunities.

This brings me to some considerations inspired by the title of this conference, that is, why should we have better land management in Europe?

It is a fact that land degradation is literally eroding our land bank: some 105 million hectares (16% of Europe's land area) are affected by soil erosion; an increasing body of evidence shows that soil organic matter in arable land in Europe is steadily decreasing; a quarter of forest soils substantially exceed critical limits for soil acidification; and we are losing at least around 250 hectares of land per day because of urban expansion and infrastructure development.

Yet, we demand more and more from our limited land resources. EU policies, such as the CAP, Regional Policy, bio-energy targets and nature protection, have a significant and growing impact on land use, often with competing demands.

Land management in Europe is important not only in terms of reducing health risks and environmental impacts, but also in terms of strategic importance that preserving our land resources and the multi-functionality of European soils play in a global context.

The world's population is likely to reach 9 billion by 2050. And many of these people rightly aspire to higher standards of living. This means that by 2050 demand for food, feed and fibre is

forecast to increase by 70%. Yet, land – especially fertile land – is a very limited resource. Globally, we depend on just 15% of the Earth's landmass for food production, as the rest is either too cold or too dry, too high, too salty and so on. In these circumstances – and as we don't have another planet – we have no choice but to use the natural resources more efficiently. And the land resource is a key one!

But let's take a closer look at the role of soil for food production. According to the FAO, the amount of land for agriculture will need to expand globally by 13% by 2030. Yet, in the EU, the current land take of around 250 hectares per day means that, every year, we lose a surface area larger than the city of Berlin, or, every ten years, a surface area equal to Cyprus. Most, if not all, of this lost land comes from agriculture, so in the period 1990-2006 we lost the capacity of producing about 6.1 million tonnes of wheat. This is not an insignificant figure, as it represents 15% of the annual French production, Europe's largest wheat producer and one of the largest worldwide.

Can we then always rely on imports of food, feed and fibre?

We already use over 20 million hectare annually of food and feed coming from the rest of the world. The growth in world population, rising meat and dairy consumption in the emerging economies, and expansion of bio-energy will all lead to increased global land use and potential soil degradation. At the same time, weather events linked to climate change, desertification, and land take for urbanisation and infrastructure will aggravate this trend. The EU will thus be even more dependent in future on its finite land resources, which comprises some of the most fertile soils in the world, and to their sustainable use.

That is why in September the European Commission adopted a *Roadmap to a resource efficient Europe*. The Roadmap is intended to provide the predictable signals to public and private actors of the direction they need to take in the coming decades, and it provides the milestones to measure our progress.

It highlights that the current land take trend is unsustainable and proposes that, by 2020, EU policies take into account their direct and indirect impact on land use in the EU and globally, and the rate of land take is on track with the aim of achieving no net land take by 2050.

This is an ambitious milestone indeed, and reaching no net land take by 2050 is therefore going to require a profound rethink of the way in which we use our land, and of land use priorities. But I'm afraid that in reality we do not have any other real alternatives.

And tackling past soil pollution and regenerating brownfield sites is a way of limiting land take and soil sealing, hence the encroachment on agricultural land or green areas. This offers a win-win opportunity which is going to become more and more important in the future.

Among other actions that the Commission intends to undertake to meet the milestone, are also work on Land Use Communication and guidelines on best practice to limit, mitigate or compensate soil sealing.

The EEA currently estimates that there are 1.8 million potentially contaminated sites in Europe. Out of these, for 240,000 we actually already know that they are contaminated. While the combined surface area of these sites is not known – it could vary from a few square metres for a small petrol station to tens of square kilometres for big industrial sites – it is likely to be

very large. The potential is there for exploiting already sealed soil and avoiding land take on green areas and agricultural land.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before passing the floor to Minister Kupfer, I would like to conclude by thanking him and also his colleagues in the Saxony Office once again for cooperating with the Commission in bringing to Brussels such an array of European experts on soil remediation and brownfield regeneration. I am certain you will make a valuable contribution to the reflection process on better land use in the EU.

Questions of the land and soil management are simply too serious that we could - by any chance - afford not to deal with them with the same level of seriousness and responsibility. And you can certainly count that the Commission and I personally will continue to play an active role.

I wish you a successful meeting and thank you for your attention.