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The Knowledge Based Bio-Economy towards 2020

Turning challenges into opportunities

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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me as Flemish Minister responsible for Innovation to welcome you today. It offers me the opportunity to address you on the perspectives of research and innovation in Europe, Flanders and this conference in particular. We are pleased to see that this conference has attracted more than 500 participants. I want to thank the Directorate-General Research for the co-operation and support during the organisation of this presidency event.

The KBBE towards 2020 conference

A broad approach

Research and innovation are vital to Europe's competitiveness and economic growth. Stimulation of research and innovation is necessary, but it must not become a goal in itself. We also have to ensure that the results are transformed into products and services that create growth and jobs. Today the European bio-economy already represents an annual turnover of 2 billion euro and employs 22 million people. The forecasts are that its size will rise strongly in the coming decades. Building a bio-economy will serve the environment, a strong and competitive industry and will benefit the society at large. Therefore I am very pleased to see the variety of biobased products which have been brought together in the exposition. These products reflect one of the main issues you will discuss today. Namely, what are the conditions that we as policy makers need to create to support the full deployment of the bio-economy in Europe. When we also consider education of people with the right skills, regulation for biodegradable products, added value products from side streams and waste, we see that what we need is a holistic and integrated approach across many policy domains.

The Belgian Presidency

When the priorities were being set for the Belgian Presidency, particular attention was paid to the EU's 'rolling agenda' of forthcoming initiatives.

For R&D the main themes for Belgium are

- First of all, the EU 2020 strategy, particularly the development of the flagship initiatives 'innovation union' and "an industrial policy for the globalisation era" and the Commission's Research and Innovation Plan;

- Secondly, the European Research Area;
- Thirdly, Research and Development for a sustainable society;
- And finally, the role of the regions in R&D and innovation, and the development of an EU science policy.

We look forward to see how the European commission will launch the 'European Innovation Partnerships' between the EU and the national and regional levels including the building of the bio-economy by 2020.

Because innovation involves much more than 'just' R&D, the ministers responsible for industrial policy will also devote considerable attention to the 'innovation union' initiative. Together with their research colleagues, they will seek to reach a series of mutually acceptable political conclusions. In addition, the ministers of industry are also expected to focus on 'industrial policy for the globalisation era', another European 2020 flagship initiative. Within the Council for Competitiveness, the Belgian presidency intends to focus more horizontal attention on policies for Small and Medium sized Enterprises.

The roadmap for research and innovation in Europe

Industry is an important actor considering that from the 3% of GDP that should be spent on R&D, 2% must come from the private sector. Unfortunately, the R&D spending in Europe is below 2%, compared to 2.6% in the US and 3.4% in Japan. To improve the participation from industry in the framework programme several measures have been taken. A good example are the Joint Technology Initiatives. But one must be aware that not only the absolute amounts spent on R&D count but also the capacity of translating excellent research into new products and services. The latter is a well known difficulty for Europe.

Research and innovation in Flanders

The Flemish government has an explicit policy stimulating science, technology development and innovation. Flanders' expenditures on R&D and innovation activities reach 2.03% of its GDP; this is above the EU-15 average of 1.91%.

Our aspirations are high. The major objective is to make Flanders one of Europe's leading regions in certain research areas such as in biotechnology. Flanders can rely on its excellent strategic research centres, IMEC, VITO, VIB and IBBT, its universities and also on many other knowledge institutions to realise its strategy.

Ambition can not be pursued without the necessary focus. To tackle the grand societal challenges, Flanders deliberately focuses its strategy on a few key domains with a significant socio-economic impact and a large competitive potential.

The bioeconomy (in Flanders)

I already mentioned that bio-economy is part of the 'innovation Union' flagship
Rather than on fossil resources, the bio-economy is based on biomass resources for food and non-food products including new medicines for better health, fuel, new materials and polymers. The bio-economy based on biomass and sugar chemistry realizes the third industrial revolution after the introduction of steam and coal and the development of the ICT society. In this bio-economy ambitious criteria of sustainability for society, environment and economy will be fundamental. It will allow us to meet the challenges ahead of us such as climate change, dependence on fossil fuels and the ageing of the population.
In Flanders and Belgium we have a solid base in biotechnology and a number of assets in green or agricultural related biotech, red or health related and white or industrial biotech with strong academic groups and a growing industry. The biotech industry network FlandersBio counts more than 140 companies with biotech activities in Flanders. You will find a number of Belgian and Flemish success stories in your conference pack. It shows that Belgian academic groups are part of international collaboration and how under the umbrella of the Flemish Institute for Biotechnology, several spin offs and successful start up companies originated during the last 12 years. A number of these biotech companies matured to solid companies.

More recently, in the harbour of Ghent the Bio-Energy Valley concentrated a number of industrial companies in the fields of generation, distribution, storage and use of bio-energy and green industry-based products. The activities include the operation of a new pilot bio-refinery plant in an open infrastructure approach. Today, the white biotech stakeholders in Flanders are united within CINBIOS, an active industry and academic network under the wings of FlandersBio.
In the frame of this conference many of you had the opportunity yesterday to visit these two clusters in Gent and I hope you found it interesting and enjoyed it.

Many of the societal challenges such as the increasing world population and ever higher demand for meat, climate change, poverty and famine, our dependence on exhausting fossil resources can only be addressed globally and with a decisive choice for a biotechnology driven bio-economy.
We believe our experience in the different types of biotechnologies can contribute to realisation of the global goals of the bio-economy. Flanders has set up a Trust Fund with the UNIDO whose goals fit with our own regional development programme. Our government focuses on the development of a green economy with high standards of sustainability in a knowledge society in which knowledge is shared at the benefit of the global society. These intentions are part of the Flanders in Action programme and are part of our government charter, including a development programme for the world's least developed areas.

Thank you for your attention.