

Conference ‘Sustainable biomass for European energy’

29 November 2010

**Speech of Jean-Marc Nollet,
Vice-President of the Walloon Government and Walloon Minister of Energy**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by paying due tribute to the work of the Flemish Energy Agency, the Flemish institute for technological research (VITO) and the Walloon association for the promotion and the use of biomass (ValBiom), for co-organising this event together with the Department of Energy and Sustainable Building of the Walloon region. In the current Belgian political context, I am very grateful that such a fruitful collaboration has made this conference possible. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Committee of the Regions for hosting this event organised in the framework of the Belgian Presidency of the European Union.

It is a privilege for me to be speaking to such a large audience and the wide range of parties represented here. Your presence gives evidence of the growing interest for the role sustainable biomass can play in the European energy supply.

Biomass has the potential to produce cost-effective renewable energy in the short, medium and long term. Doing so, energy from biomass can play a significant role in bringing down CO2 emissions, diversifying our energy supply and reducing our energy imports, thereby increasing our security of supply. Biomass can also contribute to creating new jobs and enabling the development of a sustainable local and regional economy. Used in an efficient way, biomass can also help lower the emission of harmful particles and other local pollutants. So far, biomass has failed to fully meet expectations, but it is, I reckon, a ‘sleeping giant’ in terms of renewable energy sources.

Nevertheless, as we all know, biomass is available in limited quantities. The morning session was particularly useful in helping get more insight on the availability of biomass in Europe and worldwide. An obvious conclusion - that I am sure we all share - is that biomass should be used in the most efficient way.

As Walloon Minister of Energy, I am convinced that energy policy should - as a matter of priority – focus on energy savings and energy efficiency. Taking into account both their potential and limiting factors, it is in such a context of a coherent and sustainable energy policy that the benefits of biomass - and other renewable energy sources - can be maximised.

In the transport sector, the substitution of fossil fuels by bio fuels could also be an important measure for bringing down CO2 emissions, but before bio fuels are introduced on a large scale, the existing large efficiency potentials have to be exploited.

The first of the two afternoon sessions enlightened us about where biomass should primarily be used, i.e. where it is most efficient: in the production of electricity, heating and cooling. Combined heat and power (CHP), in particular, provides an excellent and very efficient means of valuing biomass. In the electricity sector, as my Flemish colleague Freya Van den Bossche highlighted, and rightly so, biomass is quite interesting to complement 'fluctuating' renewable energy sources like wind and solar energy - as it can be stored and used whenever necessary. Biomass is therefore key to achieving a (near) 100% renewable-based electric supply system in the long run.

The second afternoon session made it clear that it is crucial for food safety, biodiversity and social issues that biomass be produced in a sustainable way, with the largest possible positive climate balance, and gave us examples of how this could be done.

As far as bio fuels and bio liquids are concerned, the current sustainability criteria included in the Renewable Energy Directive adopted in 2009 by the European Union do not, I reckon, provide enough guarantees at the environmental and social levels. They should therefore be strengthened. A clear preference should be made for a second generation of bio fuels, based on wood, straw or waste, giving a much better energy balance.

In February of this year, the European Commission also adopted a report on sustainability requirements for the use of solid biomass and biogas in electricity, heating and cooling. In the absence of harmonised rules at EU level – only recommendations on sustainability criteria to be used by those Member States that wish to introduce a scheme at national level are made - Member States are free to put in place their own national schemes for solid and gaseous biomass used in electricity, heating and cooling. Hopefully, this is only a first step towards the prompt definition – at European and, if possible, global levels – of binding sustainability criteria for all production and use of biomass. In this respect, Belgium, under the impulse of its Regions, wrote to the European Commission to make sure it does not lose sight of the importance of a sustainability regime that can be harmonised at the European level. We will keep on pushing this view, namely next year, when the Commission makes public its evaluation on the matter.

Please allow me to wrap up by saying a few words about the energy and biomass policy of the Walloon Region of Belgium. The promotion of efficient energy use and the development of renewable energy sources are the backbones of the Walloon energy policy. As part of it, it is our intention to adopt a regional renewable energy strategy as soon as possible. This strategy will include a support scheme for 'green heat', i.e. heat produced from renewable energy sources, including biomass, and combined heat and power.

The Walloon Government also intends to track and certify - in the framework of regional support schemes - agricultural, forest-based and industrial biomass, distinguishing regional and imported resources as well as identifying potential new resources. This move should enable us to better coordinate our objectives related to energy, reusing of material and recycling.

I would also like to highlight the expertise of the Walloon region as far as biomass is concerned. The Walloon Agricultural Research Centre of Gembloux, represented here by its Acting Deputy Director General, Mr. Schenkels, is at the forefront of Research and Development into second and third generation of bio fuels.

And, as we have heard from the Walloon Commission for Energy during this afternoon's session 2, sustainability criteria are already being implemented in Wallonia for stationary bio energy through the issuance of 'green certificates' for biomass facilities. These criteria, related to the certification of the supply chain of biomass, are more stringent than in the majority of EU countries.

Let me finish with two good news. Firstly, on the very day of the opening of the Cancún climate conference, I am happy to announce that the CO₂ emissions related to this conference have been compensated, making it a CO₂-neutral event. Secondly, a reception will now be held in the hall, where you have the opportunity to sample a few of the specialties from the 'beer country'.

Thank you for your attention and I wish those of you participating in the field trips in Flanders or Wallonia tomorrow an interesting and enjoyable visit.