

6th WORLD WATER FORUM

Marseille – France

Session

“Adapting Water Policy and Legislation to the Specificities of European Outermost Regions”

15TH March 2012 – 11h / 13h

It is with great honour that, on behalf of the President of the Conference of the Outermost Regions of Europe and President of the Government of the Azores, Carlos César, I greet all participants in this session of the 6th World Water Forum.

I would also like to convey to the *“Office de L’Eau de la Martinique”* the appreciation of the Conference of the Outermost Regions for this invitation, underlining the importance of holding a specific session and shared reflection on the particular features and challenges of water management in our regions.

It is not difficult to understand that Outermost Regions face very precise challenges and problems regarding water availability and management, especially in comparison to continental Europe.

Outermost Regions are very distant from continental Europe, they are mostly islands or archipelagos – like the Azores, scattered over hundreds of kilometres -, with small size for most, even isolated in their surrounding areas, in plus territories with difficult climate and topography and few alternatives to their traditional economic activities.

Outermost Regions, on the other hand and due to this geographical characteristics, also have a hi-level of biodiversity and extensive natural areas compared to the average for European regions.

The Treaty of the European Union itself recognizes these specificities with a special statute and the possibility of applying derogations, flexibility and special measures on several areas, of which water resources – as well as other environmental and climate issues –should naturally assume particular relevance.

In fact, water is, comprehensibly, a natural resource of significant economic and social value required in almost all activities in the Outermost Regions.

The importance of matters related to water can be asserted in the more obvious fields – supply, distribution and quality of the water for human consumption or the wastewater management – but it truly goes beyond this as it is horizontal to the livelihood and economy of the Outermost Regions.

Water is a scarce resource, needed for agricultural purposes, be it for fruit and vegetables production (as tomato in the Canaries islands or banana in several Outermost Regions) or to the livestock holdings, in the case of the Azores where water is not only essential for the animal consumptions as, through rain, for the promotion of the growth of its natural food: grass.

Although precipitation occurs all the year round in some of these regions - like in the Azores -, and others - as the Canary Islands -, face a lack of it, all Outermost Regions have on common the fact that the protection and

enhancement of water resources is even more important due to its isolation, to the vulnerability of aquatic ecosystems and to the scarcity of alternatives.

On another hand, some Regions, as my own, the Azores, given its volcanic nature, own hydrogeological resources of undeniable value which can account for investments in the sector of natural mineral waters, namely it in use for thermal or bathing purposes.

The preservation of the environmental quality is therefore also important in the area of the natural carbonated water that, for the specificity of their physicochemical features, can hold therapeutic properties with an industrial potential and a commercial added-value.

Beyond the preservation of the environmental quality, the quality of the water also has an important dimension in terms of tourism, as it maintains the green color that characterized the Azores landscape or its lakes in volcanic craters.

Still, water is also fundamental to renewable energies. For example, in the Azores, the hydroelectric component of energy accounts for about 4% of the total electricity, sustained by small water units that have been installed in four of the nine islands.

Hydroelectric reaches its most significant contribution in the island of Flores, with approximately 36% of the total production of energy in 2011.

This island can run at 100% renewable on hydroelectric resources, during some hours of winter days.

And we cannot forget that considerable water resources are needed to be pumped down to "injection wells" in order to produce geothermal energy, which represents 22% of the total renewable energy in the Azores.

Thus, the water management in these territories is, by itself, a challenge dictated from its specificities, demanding an adjustment of instruments and a high-level of investment in the planning and creation of infrastructures.

On the other hand, all these issues are also particularly important when we face climate change effects.

As we all know, due to their geomorphologic characteristics and their geographic location, the OR are particularly exposed to natural risks and to the effects of climate change.

This may result in several human and technical problems that will reach very significant proportions.

As an example, we should mention not only erosion problems, coastal flooding and an increase in the intensity of storms, but also the degradation of the quality of water and coastal hydro resources, which also affects agriculture, tourism, ecosystems, biodiversity and the production of renewable energy.

Therefore, the adaptation to climate change will also require very specific actions in the Outermost Regions, very particularly regarding water management.

In this context, the Outermost Regions authorities are conscious that water management represents a strategic tool to achieve the sustainable development, enabling the compatibility between environmental quality and its economic activities.

The Conference of the Outermost Regions has, in fact, clearly addressed this issue on several and its most important joint political positions, such as the 2009 Memoranda “The Outermost Regions in the 2020 Horizon”, as well as the European institutions, in different studies and communications.

We definitely need more coordination, shared information and good practices between the Outermost Regions, in order to address adequate water management strategies and specific indicators, namely in the implementation of EU legislation, such as the Water Framework Directive, but also on urban wastewater, on pollution and climate change in general.

Finally, to better understand our specificities, we should not forget that the Outermost Regions have amongst themselves different political status and powers to intervene in these areas. The Azores, Madeira and the Canary islands have, for instance,—autonomous legislative and political powers regarding water management and that includes, in the case of the Azores, the legislative power to adapt European regulations and directives.

Thus, I would like to underline the importance of having, in the framework of the development of cooperation projects, a strong involvement and participation of the Governments of Azores, Madeira and Canaries, as well as the regional councils of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Martin, Guyana and

La Réunion, entities that are responsible for cooperation in the framework of the Outermost Regions Conference.

Above all, it is clear that Outermost Regions face limitations on institutional, financial and operating structures, factors that plea for more collaboration, exchange and sharing of information, solutions and best practices, as well as cooperation projects, especially with EU and other international bodies.

To finalize, I enhance once more the opportunity of this session and the importance of the continuity of this partnership and cooperation between the different players of the Outermost Regions on water management, wish all of you the continuity of a productive work.

Rodrigo Oliveira

Undersecretary of European Affairs and External Cooperation

***Government of the Autonomous Region of Azores
Conference of Presidents of the Outermost Regions***