

ANNUAL REPORT

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REPORT BY PRESIDENT
BENT HANSEN.

Annual report 2003

Dear friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another year has passed and once again I stand in front of you on the final day of the General Assembly, to give the annual report of the North Sea Commission. I see the General Assembly as an important indicator for our work, and I therefore take great pride in the fact that more than 370 people have been assembled these three days in Cuxhaven, to discuss the work of the North Sea Commission and exchange experience or future projects with colleagues.

As regions we face many challenges in the coming years, and it is of crucial importance what we have a strong common voice when we seek influence. Seen in this perspective it is a great pleasure for me again this year to welcome new members of the North Sea Commission. Troms Fylkeskommune from the high north and from a little further south in Norway Nord-Trøndelag Fylkeskommune have joined us. From Scotland Scottish Border Council and Dumfries and Galloway Councils, jointly represented as the South of Scotland, are now members of the North Sea Commission. A warm welcome to all of you. With four new member region, the North Sea Commission now has the support of 71 regions from all countries around the North Sea, and with a total population of 40 mill. people.

Looking back the past year has been a busy year for the regions. The position and tasks of the regions have been up for debate in a number of countries, and the coming enlargement of the European Union has set the agenda for the work of the Convention. The Convention that in the days to follow, will give us a draft of the future structure for the EU decision making process. A new structure where hopefully the regions as the implementing authority of many European policies, and the democratic level close to our citizens, will find a more structured and visible place. Not only in the coming treaty, but also in the day to day work of European decision making. Through the CPMR the work of the convention has been followed closely, and influenced in any possible way. Before the head of states will take the final decisions it is important that we at national level continue this work. Pascal Gruselle will later on give us an update of the work carried out by CPMR.

At the Political Meeting on Wednesday here in Cuxhaven we continued a process started in Middelburg in March, where we discussed "European Regional Policies beyond 2006". One should think that the position of the regions ought to be at the very heart of any regional policy. We as regions are the objective, and we have the competence from our daily work. After looking at some of the national position papers, this is not the case. We must in the coming year seek to influence our national ministries to ascertain that the position of the regions are taken into consideration.

When we look at the present regional policy, things can be done better, and to me some of the keywords are regional programming; more flexible and less bureaucratic procedures and a more operational connection between objectives, programmes and funding. So changes are needed, but this should not be taken as an excuse to re-nationalise the regional policy or reduce the importance of cross-regional cooperation. We need a European regional policy, as a tool to support the ongoing development of the regions.

To the North Sea Commission a very important part of the Regional Policy is the Interreg North Sea Programme. We initiated the programme our selves, and from which many good inter-regional projects have been funded. The programme is our best argument for the continuation of trans-national programmes, and later on this morning Programme Manager Lorraine George will give you an update on the programme. Seen in the perspective of the structural funds post 2006 it is good to acknowledge, that as one of the very few Interreg programmes, the North Sea Programme seems to live up to the goals and timetable set out. After three calls for project proposals about 50% of the funds are allocated to 29 projects. Right now a mid-term evaluation of the programme is conducted, and following this, we will in close cooperation with the Programme Monitoring Committee and the Programme Secretariat, collect the results achieved. I hope and expect this to be good ammunition to influence and convince the national ministries of the need for a continuation of the Interreg programme.

From influence on future policies to a very present problem - Maritime Safety. When we hear the name Prestige we all recall the television pictures from the oil catastrophe on the coastline of Galicia, where Prestige sunk. What happened? Who is to blame? The discussion is still running, but it is a fact that once more the European coastline was hit by an ecological disaster that will mark Galicia for decades. It is also a fact that it will happen again if the necessary steps are not taken by international and national authorities. So far we have been meet by many investigations followed by solutions that will work in 10 years time. That is not good enough. We need to take hand on the problems know.

Initiated by Galicia, CPMR responded to the Prestige accident and a resolution sent to the national authorities and the EU Commission, was followed by meetings with Commissioner Palacio. Our vice-president Gunn Marit Helgesen represented the North Sea Commission in that meeting. Afterwards our Transport and Communication Group took the initiative to follow up on the CPMR resolution. With reference to the situation in the North Sea, a letter was sent from me to the responsible ministries. In this letter we stress one of the most ambiguous facts in international Maritime Safety. The lack of implementation and enforcement of existing legislation. The Port State Control directive from 1995 is an example of this. The 25% control of high-risk vessels is not followed in many states, and vessels that should not be allowed in our waters are every day crossing the North Sea. In the letter we ask for information concerning the present implementation, and the will to increase the control beyond this level. We have received responses from 4 states so far.

The Prestige accident did place maritime safety high on the international agenda, and progress has been made, but we need to continue the pressure on the responsible authorities, so the necessary funding is made available to implement and enforce the legislation. We can not just lean back and wait for the next accident.

As you all know from the previous years one of the most successful initiatives from the North Sea Commission is the Fisheries Partnership. The partnership between fishermen and scientists that most thought impossible. After three years of success the partnership was this year challenged by disagreements on the reduction of quotas and especially on cod. The disagreements are still there,

but as Ann Bell will report to you later on, all partners came to the only sensible solution. That dialog is the only way forward. The partnership will continue its highly valued work, and I will leave the report on this to Ann Bell, but I will dwell a little on the spin-off so to say.

The success of the Fisheries Partnership has been widely recognized all over Europe, where partners within the industry follow this new model with interest. This has led to Interreg funding; a proposal from the Commission to set up a Regional Advisory Group; a presentation to the Committee of the Regions and exchange of experience with colleagues from the Baltic and Atlantic regions.

Last year at the North Sea Conference in Bergen, the ministries recognized the Fisheries Partnership, and during the conference contact was made to OSPAR – the Oslo-Paris convention for the protection of the marine environment in the North-East Atlantic. OSPAR now has observer status in the partnership, and the North Sea Commission has through CPMR applied for observer status in OSPAR. The decision will be taken later on this month.

Politics are about influence and like I last year pointed at the importance of The North Sea Commission being represented at the North Sea Conference in Bergen, I will this year point at OSPAR as a very important forum to be represented at. If we are granted observer status the NSC will be in a new and stronger position.

When Sweden and Finland entered into the European Union the map of the union changed, and the Northern dimension became reality. In 1999 the Baltic Sea Commission established an intercom group to participate in the development of the action plan for the Northern Dimension, and the North Sea Commission got involved. Now when we look at 10 new member states of the Union - the map will change again, and so will the perspective of the Northern Dimension. I raise this issue here today, because I am concerned about the signals given from the Commission and from state levels. It is important, that a Northern Dimension after the Enlargement will address the whole Northern Dimension, and recognize the huge potentials, that goes far beyond bilateral and immediate cross-border cooperation. In an enlarged Europe we need the Northern Dimension, as a response to the central European centre of power. I would like to encourage you all to respond to this problem, and work with the Executive Committee to find a way forward.

When you go through the activities of the North Sea Commission, it is obvious that the backbone of the organisation is the six thematic groups. The group co-ordinators will a little later give their reports, but I would like to take this opportunity to thank the political chairs and vice-chairs as well as the co-ordinators and group members for their invaluable contribution to the work of the North Sea Commission. Meetings, conferences, inter-national projects, political statements and many other activities. You can follow the work of the groups on the web site, and I will encourage all member regions to participate in the work of the Thematic Groups. You all have the possibility to contribute to the work, and to seek knowledge and influence.

I will here take up one specific issue that three of the groups have been working with during the year. Offshore wind energy. The Environment Group arranged in November last year their annual conference in Blankenberg, and more than 100 delegates participated. In the conference statement, it is pointed out, that there is a severe need to have an active dialogue, with the national level to

clarify the circumstances for the development of off shore wind parks. The statement also calls for co-operation between national governments and regional authorities to create a set of criteria for the planning of wind energy around the North Sea. However, wind energy is not just energy. When a massive development is expected, it is also an opportunity for business development, but at the same time a threat to the fishing areas for the fishermen. From these perspectives the issue has been raised in all three groups, and activities will follow in the coming period.

Wind energy was on the agenda at the North Sea Conference last year in Bergen, and as a consequence of the Bergen Declaration, OSPAR were asked to work on a set of criteria for the planning of off shore wind parks. It is obvious to me that this issue contains a number of problems that can only be solved in an international forum, and there is a considerable role for The North Sea Commission to play.

As politicians we know that the next election is always just around the corner, and since the last General Assembly elections have taken place in many regions. As always changes occur and we must say goodbye to good colleagues, but I will here just mention one. Our Vice-president councillor Anne McGovern has after the election in May, decided to concentrate on the tasks back home in Fife, Scotland. Unfortunately she is not here today, but I will on behalf of us all like to thank Anne for her work with the North Sea Commission. I will miss her strong involvement and not the least her Scottish accent.

Having said goodbye to some, it will be welcome to others. I see many new faces here today and I look forward to working with you, for the benefit of our regions. I will end this report by thanking Niedersachsen for hosting this general assembly, and for a perfect organization. I hope you have all enjoyed the hospitality here in Cuxhaven.

Thank you.