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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Report on high-level events organised by the Presidency
	- Information from the Presidency

Delegations will find in the Annex an information note from the Presidency on the above subject, to be dealt with under ‘Any other business’ at the Council (Environment) meeting on 25 March 2024.

Tackling PFAS pollution & launching Knowledge Centre on Innovative Remediation Solutions

(Antwerp, 1 – 2 February 2024)

- Information from the Presidency -

In the framework of the Belgium Presidency of the Council of the EU, the regional authorities of Flanders hosted an event in Antwerp focused on addressing PFAS pollution. This event served two primary purposes: firstly, a large variety of experts shared insights gained and actions taken concerning PFAS pollution; secondly, it marked the official launch of the Flemish Knowledge Centre on Innovative Remediation Solutions (KIS), which seeks to bring together various stakeholders (authorities, knowledge institutions and industry) working on technologies for remediating PFAS pollution from the environment. These two topics were outlined in two plenary sessions, which were followed by a range of workshops.

Regarding the management of PFAS pollution, workshops were conducted to showcase the diverse actions undertaken by many different authorities. These workshops encompassed presentations covering prevention and containment measures for PFAS emissions, (bio)monitoring and reduction of PFAS exposure, soil remediation and waste management strategies, and effective risk communication and data governance.

Furthermore, the Flemish authorities presented enforcement initiatives and outlined various tools and measures for analysing PFAS across different environmental compartments, involving newly developed techniques for measuring PFAS in water, air and soil. This presentation also unveiled newly developed soil limit values and featured enforcement activities related to PFOA in firefighting foams within the framework of the POP regulation. Additionally, two new studies on Best Available Techniques (BATs) for PFAS abatement technologies in water and air emissions were presented during the event.

Workshops were also held that focused on substitution strategies for PFAS, initiatives to address the presence of PFAS in recycled materials, and the potential application of the polluter-pays principle.

The workshops featured speakers from national and regional authorities all around Europe and from international authorities (e.g. European Commission, European Environment Agency, OECD, US-EPA), industry, non-governmental organisations and research institutes.

A detailed programme, presentations from the event, outcomes and individual workshop reports are available on the event page¹.

During the event, the debates, presentations, questions from the audience and reactions at the venue illustrated several issues:

- Actions and coherent policies on PFAS are key at EU level, but also outside of the EU (see for instance the US and Asia).
- An EU-wide PFAS policy should include measures that cover the complete material cycle, and do so in a systemic and multidisciplinary way: preventing the production and use of PFAS, limiting emissions to the environment through means that include permits based on BATs and if necessary emerging techniques (ETs), minimising the spread of the pollution and the exposure of the human population, fauna and flora, remediation of contaminated sites, the treatment of PFAS-holding materials, and the destruction of PFAS residues in those materials. The phasing out of the production and use of these substances should thus be implemented as swiftly as possible, allowing only essential uses to continue until alternatives are available.
- It is absolutely necessary to ensure clean, non-toxic, safe, circular and climate-neutral material cycles. This requires substitution of hazardous substances in new products and due attention to legacy substances in waste streams that are brought back into the loop via recycling and reuse. Innovation and a European regulatory framework are needed to attain these objectives. This is essential to make the circular economy work.
- Clear messages concerning an ambitious phasing out of PFAS have to be reiterated soon – and should be in line with the Council conclusions of June 2019 on PFAS – to make sure that efforts to develop safe and sustainable alternatives are pushed and prioritised.

¹ <https://www.vlaanderen.be/en/pfas-in-flanders/tackling-pfas-pollution-launch-knowledge-center-innovative-remediation-solutions>

- It is very important to obtain and valorise the necessary data to optimise permitting, enforcing, monitoring and remediating, to minimise the impact of PFAS; this is also key for purposes of avoiding regrettable substitutions.
- Permitting and enforcement officers need legislative and scientific tools (i.e. up-to-date emission limit values and state-of-the-art analytical methods, targeted and non-targeted) to enable them to act quickly on the basis of the most up-to-date knowledge and developments on PFAS pollution, including BATs and ETs. EU quality standards for the various environmental compartments will also enhance an effective PFAS reduction policy.
- Additional activities that make it possible to apply the polluter-pays principle well are needed to tackle PFAS pollution financially and compensate for the negative (health) impact of PFAS. Extended producer responsibility and other possible instruments should be looked into.
- Many actors showed great interest in ways to substitute PFAS and also in new techniques and methods to monitor, abate, control, sanitise and remediate the impact of PFAS. Relevant techniques should be made available through sound BAT Reference documents (BREFs).
- Intensive collaboration on a European scale is essential to further develop and align the various monitoring activities and research programmes as a basis for concrete policy actions. PARC plays a key role and will set the tone for a sustainable and state-of-the-art environmental and human biomonitoring programme.
- Remediation techniques have been developed and promising new techniques are being further explored and scaled to market-ready solutions. We need to continue investing in their further development; the KIS programme launched by Flanders can serve as an exemplar.
- The PFAS crisis in Belgium created momentum for collaboration and for initiatives aimed at innovation. It is crucial to have sufficient funds and platforms to enhance cooperation to support development and demonstration projects.
- Requests for more knowledge-sharing and enhanced collaboration were part of several contributions, including testimonies given by inhabitants of contaminated areas who had suffered impacts from PFAS.

Climate Chance Europe 2024 Wallonia Summit

(Liège, 8 – 9 February 2024)

- Information from the Presidency -

The Climate Chance Europe 2024 Wallonia Summit took place on 8 and 9 February. The participants called for collective and coordinated action to meet the challenges posed by climate change and to protect Europe's populations, ecosystems and economy from its effects.

The Liège Declaration² was adopted by a thousand participants, representing the diversity of non-state actors of over 20 nationalities and numerous European networks and organisations of non-state actors, such as businesses, researchers, civil society and local governments. It constitutes a roadmap for adaptation to climate change by non-state actors. It includes a section on advocacy and a call to action, with specific recommendations for European authorities.

Some key points of the Liège Declaration:

- Non-state actors mention that, above all, the best adaptation policy is a policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Mitigation efforts must be pursued to remain within a situation in which adaptation is possible.
- They underline the importance of nature-based solutions in adapting to climate change, with a focus on the preservation, restoration and sustainable management of ecosystems.
- They call for investment in resilient infrastructure, promotion of sustainable agricultural practices and the establishment of early warning systems.
- They recognise that vulnerable populations are often hit hardest by the effects of climate change, and call for multilateral, multi-stakeholder action to tackle these challenges.
- They call on all political levels and non-state actors to make adaptation a key priority in policy-making, to integrate a culture of prevention and resilience into all decisions, and to mobilise the necessary resources to support adaptation actions.

² [The Declaration \(climate-chance.org\)](https://climate-chance.org/)

- They also call for greater cooperation and coordination between non-state actors, local and national governments and European institutions, to maximise the effectiveness and impact of adaptation measures.

The Liège Declaration will be used throughout the Belgian Presidency and also be taken to the major events on the international climate agenda 2024, in particular the COP29 climate conference in Baku.

European Conference for a Just Transition

(Brussels, 4 - 5 March 2024)

- Information from the Presidency -

The Belgian Presidency organised the European Conference for a Just Transition, held on 4 and 5 March in the Egmont Palace (Brussels).

The conference made a significant contribution to shaping a collective vision for a just transition in preparation for the forthcoming EU legislature. Some 350 people participated in the conference, including official representatives of 22 EU Member States, members of the European Parliament, officials from eight European Commission DGs, European employer and employee organisations, key civil-society stakeholders and academic experts. They shared their visions and exchanged views on what actions, policy initiatives and investments are necessary to make sure the transition leaves no one behind.

The conference began with a high-level segment which was introduced by keynote presentations from The International Labour Organization and the European Environment Agency and a contribution by the European Economic and Social Committee which presented their [explanatory opinion on a Just Transition](#). Afterwards a round-table discussion took place with a scene-setting by the European Commission Executive Vice-President for European Green Deal, Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, Maros Šefčovič, and contributions by thirty other high-level delegates from Member States, social partners, civil society and several EU institutions. Afterwards, two thematic break-out sessions were organised, which made more detailed exchanges possible on two crucial topics in the context of a just transition, namely the conversion of industrial sectors and the eradication of poverty. The second day started with a presentation on the progress made on a just transition in Belgium over the past three years. Afterwards a keynote address was given by the European Social Observatory on the results of a study on the state of the art, gaps and ways forward of the 'leave no one behind' principle in the EU Green Deal. The conference concluded with a round-table discussion on the future of the European Green Deal and a discussion of elements for Council conclusions on a Just Transition.

Drawing on the presentations and discussions, the chair of this conference under the Belgian Presidency noted, non-exhaustively, the following messages:

- the call for an EU Just Transition Policy Framework (EU JTPF);
- the need for strong European governance for a just transition, including the creation of a Just Transition Observatory, the appointment of a Commissioner for a Just Transition in the next European Commission and, potentially, the preparation of a European Directive for a Just Transition;
- the key importance of stakeholder involvement to co-create strong just-transition policies. These should be developed, implemented and evaluated through strengthening existing social dialogue in the context of a just transition. Civil-society dialogue, engagement of regional and local authorities, and participation by and outreach to marginalised and under-represented groups are also deemed essential;
- the crucial importance of specifically taking the situation of the most vulnerable in society into account in designing, implementing and evaluating just-transition policies;
- the need for well-planned conversion of industrial sectors to serve a sustainable economy that provides for the well-being of all within planetary boundaries while enabling enterprises to become competitive in a fair way;
- the importance of strong industrial and social policies to accompany the industries, businesses, SMEs and their workers through the greening of the economy to safeguard our welfare model and to provide decent jobs;
- the importance of taking into account the specific situations of all regions in the EU in designing, implementing and evaluating just-transition policies and acknowledging the different circumstances and starting points of different Member States and regions, so as to tackle the transition in a just way;
- the need for an EU funding strategy for a just transition, to attain climate and environmental objectives in the long term in a just way;
- the importance of also taking into account the global dimension of a just transition when designing implementing and evaluating green, industrial and social policies in the European Union and in its Member States.

Conference for Mayors: Translating the EU Green Deal into local action

(Brussels, 15 March 2024)

- Information from the Presidency -

On 15 March 2024, the Conference of Mayors convened in Brussels, bringing together mayors and representatives of local and regional governments from across Europe. The conference aimed to explore strategies for translating the ambitious goals of the European Green Deal into tangible local actions.

The conference commenced with a keynote session held in the European Parliament, featuring notable speakers such as Gwendolyn Rutten, Vice-Minister-President of Flanders, and Maroš Šefčovič, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission.

Three panel discussions followed, focusing on critical aspects of local and regional climate action:

- **Innovative Multilevel Governance:** this panel emphasised the indispensable role of local and regional governments in achieving climate targets and called for closer collaboration between national, regional, and local authorities. The importance of constant dialogue and tailored approaches to involve diverse stakeholders were highlighted;
- **Empowering and Financing the Cities Transition:** discussions in this panel underscored the need for local and regional capacity-building and the diverse financial needs of municipalities. Participants stressed the urgency of accelerating the pace of implementation and ensuring resilience with respect to climate impacts;
- **The Energy Union:** this panel delved into engaging citizens and small businesses in the transition to renewable energy. Strategies for making climate and energy policies tangible were discussed, along with the imperative of closing the awareness gap among households and SMEs.

The morning of the conference concluded with mayors and local and regional leaders signing a declaration reaffirming their commitment to the European Green Deal³. The declaration called for enhanced multilevel governance, harmonised monitoring systems and more flexible financing instruments to support local and regional initiatives effectively.

The conference continued in the European Committee of the Regions, hosting parallel sessions on various themes:

- Fit for 55 Translated into Local Solutions: this session showcased specific actions by municipalities and regions directed towards climate neutrality. Examples were presented of integrated solutions and the role of EU policy instruments in supporting local and regional initiatives;
- Planning for Healthy and Resilient Cities: discussion focused on the impact of urban planning policies on health and well-being, emphasising the need for transformative action. EU initiatives supporting local and regional implementation of the Green Deal and strategies for integrated planning were explored;
- Local Green Deals: participants outlined new approaches to political leadership for implementing the European Green Deal locally. Case studies demonstrated how cities are promoting resource efficiency, circularity, and job creation while engaging stakeholders and leveraging technology.

The Conference of Mayors provided a platform for robust discussions and exchanges of knowledge on translating the EU Green Deal into local actions. By empowering local and regional authorities, fostering innovative governance structures and aligning financial mechanisms with local and regional needs, the EU should aim to accelerate the transition to a sustainable and resilient future for all communities across Europe.

³ [Translating the EU Green Deal into local action \(abbflanders.be\)](https://abbflanders.be/en/2023/09/20/Translating-the-EU-Green-Deal-into-local-action)