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High-level Meeting in Vienna – European inland navigation policy in the making

Many factors speak for the increased use of inland navigation within the European transport system: lower energy consumption, reduced external costs, sufficient free capacities and low transport costs for the European industry. Today's High-level Meeting deals with the core question what can be done on the political level, to shift more freight on the inland waterways.

The Austrian EU Presidency has set two main priorities in the field of transport policy: traffic safety and the promotion of inland navigation. The Inland Navigation Summit currently taking place in Vienna reflects these priorities Austria has set in the framework of its EU Presidency.

This is in line with the objectives set by the European Commission to strengthen inland navigation in Europe. The NAIADES Action Programme, recently published by the European Commission, is the starting point of the High Level Meeting. With this Communication, the Commission intends to underline the advantages of inland navigation, as well as to overcome existing barriers, which hinder the use of this sustainable mode of transport.

NAIADES proposes to create favourable framework conditions for inland navigation services, to create jobs and skills, to modernise the European inland navigation fleet and waterway infrastructure. It also advocates ways to improve the image and acceptance of inland navigation among the European industry. The NAIADES action programme has been developed by the European Commission in close co-operation with its Member States as well as with the private sector.

The Austrian Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology recently launched the National Action Plan (NAP) on Danube Navigation, which represents the Austrian implementation of the European Communication. In this framework, it is a declared objective to shift more cargo to the environmental-friendly Danube waterway in order to reduce the strain on national roads.

Inland navigation is not only attractive from an environmental perspective, it is also a commercially attractive mode of transport. This was confirmed by yesterday's industry congress in the Austrian Federal Chamber of Commerce: NAIADES was welcomed and at the centre of lively discussions among high-ranking representatives of the European industry and the inland navigation sector. A Business Delegation will present the main conclusions of the Industry Congress at the High Level Meeting.

The main objective of the High Level Meeting is to present a common position towards the implementation of the NAIADES Programme. The implementation of the NAIADES Programme is to be pursued in a common effort of the EU Member States, the Danube riparian states, the river commissions and the commissions for the protection of the rivers, as well as the inland navigation industry. The aim of the High Level Meeting is to reach conclusive statements for the Transport Council, which will be held between the 8th and 9th of June 2006 in Luxembourg.

The end of Austria's EU Presidency in June 2006 should mark a decisive step towards the realisation of the European Action Programme.

The High Level Meeting has received accrued attention from all over Europe – both within and outside the European Union. More than 100 high-ranking representatives from 24 countries, the European Commission, as well as 15 inland navigation and environmental organisations will be attending today's meeting. Ministers of Transport from major inland navigation countries such as Belgium and Romania will provide an active input. Indeed, although the NAIADES programme addresses EU Member States, Austria has set the integration of other Danube riparian states as a main priority of on its Presidency agenda, especially considering the upcoming accession of these states to the EU.

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