Webinar on underwater radiated noise from shipping:

Speaking note

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you today to this webinar on shipping and underwater noise. Granted, it's been a little more quiet in the North Sea the last couple of days. But luckily the Suez Canal is back open for business and the Ever Given will soon be buzzing through the North sea. With a convoy of ships in its wake.

This topic is not so obvious but it is a very important one. According to the World Health Organization, noise pollution is the second biggest threat to human health after air pollution. And just as with humans, noise pollution also has a major impact on marine life.

Marine and ocean life is constantly on the move, looking for food, on the way to spawning grounds, looking for a partner. However, the sea has become much busier in recent decades. This results in an important increase and continuous presence of underwater noise. Underwater noise, and certainly the low frequencies, can spread over a vast area.

We know underwater noise in two ways.

Firstly, there is the acute or impulsive noise generated by the driving of wind turbine piles or the use of sonar. This is a temporary overload with a major impact on marine mammals. They can suffer hearing damage and physical injury. In regard to those effects, we are to some extent able to find appropriate measures. For example the use of a double bubble curtain when driving piles or the use of a pinger to repel marine mammals before detonating ammunition.

This is different for ambient noise, at lower frequencies and continuously present, of which shipping is an important source. The impact of ambient noise is chronic and has an effect on a lot of marine life, but it varies greatly from species to species. Often, the impact is difficult to demonstrate because one has to monitor and evaluate the behavior of marine species. It is therefore still a scientific challenge to formulate a sound environmental policy objective and to define appropriate measures. With this study, we want to take a step forward and demonstrate the potential of some measures in a tangible and concrete way.

The studies presented to you today were conducted in close cooperation with the Royal Belgian Shipowners' Association. I would like to sincerely thank them for sharing their data with us and their openness to consider the proposed scenarios. Our Belgian shipowners have committed themselves in the 2018 Sustainable Shipping Plan to participate constructively in the search for efficient solutions to less obvious problems.

As you may know, Belgium takes the lead internationally when it comes to reducing emissions from shipping. Our North Sea itself is part of an Emission Control Area where nitrogen and sulphur emissions are strictly controlled and, this year, black carbon as well. Our ambition is to reduce CO_2 emissions by 55% by 2030. By 2050 we aim for zero emissions.

And we also want to be ambitious when it comes to noise reduction. But we must also be realistic. Taking measures costs money and shipping is still an economic activity. With this study, we have found ways to bring things together so that 1 + 1 can yield more than 2.

We have investigated solutions that lead to both a reduction in underwater noise and a reduction in emissions. These measures can also result in a more economic fuel efficiency. Investing in a combined approach to environmental problems is the way forward.

With this initiative, we want to raise the issue of noise pollution and, together with Canada and the industry, take a leading role within the IMO to develop further concrete measures on an international level. We also invite other countries in the world to further study the potential of noise and CO_2 emission reduction and share their findings within the IMO.

The recommendations from the study can also contribute to the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, which aimed to achieve good environmental status by 2020. No country has yet achieved this status and, certainly when it comes to underwater noise, we still have a long way to go.

A coordinated approach at IMO, in the OSPAR-treaty and at the EU level will be crucial and we are already prepared work on this based on these new insights. I hope to continue working on this with you, the shipping industry, NGO's and international partners, gathering knowledge and building a science based policy. A policy focused on a healthy ocean in collaboration with the shipping industry.

I wish you all an engaging and informative webinar.

Vincent Van Quickenborne

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the North Sea