

SPEECH OF THE WEEK: The Mediterranean Solar Plan - a necessity, not an option

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Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner articulates why renewable energy especially solar energy is a key part of Europe's external policy development challenges and secure our energy future.



I am delighted to be invited to open this session today on the Mediterranean Solar Plan. I am delighted, not just because I personally believe that because solar energy is one of the most promising sources of renewable energy for the future - more on that later - but because the issues which underpin this event - how to address the increasing energy demands of citizens in a sustainable manner and within the long-term context of climate change - constitute some of the most pressing and complex external relations policy challenges of our times.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When Russia cut gas supplies to Ukraine in 2006, European supplies were not seriously affected. When it did so this year, European households suffered. This was another wake-up call - if one were needed - that enhancing energy security in Europe is an increasingly pressing concern, and one that needs a European, rather than national, response.

Last month's events underscored the importance of diversifying our energy imports in terms of energy mix, origin and transportation routes. All of this we are seeking to do. If we are to meet our 20/20/20 targets, it is clear that this energy diversification strategy must include a significant shift to renewable energies and in particular solar.

I'd like to begin with a few thoughts on why I believe solar is so promising an energy source for the future, and why conditions for its development are propitious. I'll then sketch out our ambitions for the Mediterranean Solar Plan and how it fits into our wider Energy Security Strategy. I'll close with a few words on climate change

So, why is solar energy promising? I would argue because:

- * it has huge potential: the sun provides enough energy in one day to meet the world's annual energy consumption for 40 years;
- * it is an energy source which is distributed world-wide and is inexhaustible;
- * Solar thermal and solar photovoltaic - the conversion of solar energy into electricity through the use of cells - are proven energy technologies that do not contribute to rising greenhouse gas levels; and
- * I believe that, solar energy technologies will be able - in time and with research support - to compete with fossil fuels. The Obama Administration's commitment to back green energy research - much as we are doing through our Strategic Energy Technology (SET) Plan - is therefore welcome;
- * Last but not least in terms of benefits, solar has significant potential for job creation. To give but one example, the world's largest solar photovoltaic farm is taking shape near Moura, a small town in Portugal, which boasts the most sunshine per square metre a year in Europe. As a result of its policies on renewable energy, in less than three years, Portugal has trebled its hydropower capacity, quadrupled its wind power, and is investing in flagship wave and photovoltaic plants. All of this has created jobs. And we know that in the Mediterranean region, 22 million jobs will need to be created in the next few years to simply sustain current employment levels.

In other words, Ladies and Gentlemen, solar presents significant potential advantages, if we make the right investment in research to ensure that it becomes commercially viable and cost effective as soon as possible. As diversification into renewable energy becomes no longer a matter of choice - but of necessity - it abundantly clear that we must make these investments.

And the time is ripe for the development of solar energy, it seems to me, for three reasons:

First, current efforts for reviving economic growth in the wake of the financial crisis can and should provide us with a real incentive to target the development of clean energy technologies and related industries, both in the EU and partner countries;

Second, the whole international community in Copenhagen at the end of this year will agree the future regime to tackle Climate Change. An ambitious and effective action plan for the development of renewable energy will be an important part of the overall strategy; and

Third, at EU level, we are aiming to step up action to achieve our 20% renewable energy target. We are looking towards the new

renewables directive as an important instrument for intensifying the development and use of green energies in the EU and in third countries, particularly in the EU's neighbourhood.

Turning now to our main subject today - the Mediterranean Solar Plan. Identified as one of the priority initiatives of the Union for the Mediterranean, its aim, as the name suggests, is to increase the use of solar energy in the Mediterranean. By facilitating energy production from renewable energy sources, we are confident it will provide a boost for green electricity trade and encourage the development of a "Euro-Mediterranean green electricity market". It should help address internal energy demand in participating countries, as well as help us implement the European Energy and Climate Package.

In terms of Commission action, I see three priorities for the coming months:

We need to continue supporting the development of a stable legislative and regulatory framework in the Euro-Mediterranean area. It should favour the development of renewable energy and be based on the EU acquis. Several projects are already underway which seek to do just that, for example that with Euro-Mediterranean energy regulators (Medreg). We need to develop these further.

I already mentioned that we are putting in place policies to enable us to reach our 20% renewable target by 2020. We should share this experience with Mediterranean partners as we are doing with the Regional Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency in Cairo.

And finally, we must facilitate the development and adoption of modern technologies. European industry is a world leader in this area and the EU member states have some of the world's largest solar power plants. Germany alone accounts for about half of the solar power capacity in the world. Europe can therefore share its best practice and the technological know how, whilst continuing to support research and development of the best business models and industrial partnerships for the development of solar energy. The Commission is currently supporting such initiatives through the 7th Framework Programme for research in energy.

Commission action is important, but to make the Mediterranean Solar Plan a real success, we need the active engagement of all stakeholders - government, industry, and researchers. To this end, it may be useful to consider convening a high level event to provide a platform for a thorough discussion and decisions on the way forward.

The last point I wanted to make, is how the Mediterranean Solar Plan fits into our wider Energy Strategy in the region.

Energy issues have of course long been a priority of Euro-Mediterranean relations. We have regular meetings of Energy Ministers - the most recent, and 5th since the start of Barcelona Process, was held in December 2007.

We have a Priority Action Plan for Sustainable Energy Development to 2013 which covers: the promotion of renewable energies; improved convergence of energy policies; integration of energy markets in the Euro-Mediterranean region; and the development of energy infrastructures of common interest.

The European Commission already finances a Regional Program and projects under the Neighbourhood Investment Facility to support these aims, as well as a regular coordination mechanism in the form of an Experts Group of the Euro-Mediterranean Energy Forum.

I have personally promoted these energy objectives during visits to Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Libya and signed numerous agreements with Mediterranean countries that include an energy component.

The Mediterranean Solar Plan is then just one strand - if a vital new one - in our wider strategy for enhancing energy security.

I'd like to close, if I may, with a few words of Martin Luther King which seem to me to perfectly sum up the importance of the climate change/energy security issues we are dealing with today:

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now...There is such a thing as being too late...We may cry out desperately for time to pause ... but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones ...of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words - "too late".

Ladies and Gentlemen, the most recent data on climate change show that changes are happening far faster than predicted and that the Mediterranean region will be particularly affected. The risk of our being "too late" is real. That means the shift to green energy has to happen now. Delivering on the Mediterranean Solar Plan is one step in that direction.

Thank you for your attention.