On the 27th of September 2007, the European Commission has appointed a new TEN-T Waterway Coordinator, Mrs Karla Peijs, former Netherlands Transport Minister. She draws an overview of the Project for TRAVAUX Magazine.

By Mona Mottot

How is the Seine-Nord Europe Canal Project integrated within the Naiades Action Program?

The Naiades Action Program (NAP) objective is to promote inland navigation and to implement solutions in order to enhance the inland waterways transport.

The white book on transport published in 2001 by the European Commission and revised in 2006, made it clear that it is no longer possible to only focus on the roads in the European Union. We need all modes of transport: roadways, railways and waterways. Airways transport of goods is limited to high value products as this transport mode is quite more expensive.

If we think of sustainable transport modes, then we think rail and navigation. The Naiades Action Program which focuses on waterways is a direct consequence of the EC white book on transport. All is specified: what we can do for shipping on waterways; how can we make it easier and safer (risks are an important part of the NAP). It is really a firm basis, under the coordination of the European Commission, to make more and better use of the inland waterways.

How will the Seine-Nord Europe Canal contribute to the rationalisation of the European Transport System?

If you look around in this part of Europe, in the Netherlands, in Germany, in Belgium and in France, all those countries have big cities and cities-like environments. We must consider the fact that roads in Europe are very congested. And at the same time, it has been predicted that the freight transport of goods will grow, certainly double, or at least increase over 80%. This growth is impossible to be achieved with the road only. The growth of freight traffic must be accompanied by a transfer of capacity from road transport to railway and waterway transport. This switch would ultimately reduce the congestion of the large Northern European roads. We really need the rail, but we have to be realistic: on the rail, we can only deal with limited percentages. In the Netherlands, we built the first dedicated freight rail and it represents only 6 to 7% of the whole transport capacity. Thus, waterway transport makes its comeback as competitive alternative to road transport. This would be enhanced by an increase in the maximum tonnage of boats and consequently a very significant drop in transportation costs. This transport modes rationalisation will positively impact the involved countries activities.

How will this Project facilitate the economic and industrial development of the crossed regions?

In the North of France, there is now a very narrow canal towards Paris. It is not possible to go through with ships bigger than 1,200 tons. So it is not satisfactory to really provide everything that the Paris-Ile-de-France Region needs. Solving this bottleneck problem on the French side could enable 15 million tonnes of additional freight as early as the first years of operation of the Canal.

Also the French Government Plan programmed four important multi-modal logistics platforms which will have strong local impacts on economics. Each of
priority project

these platforms will attract all kind of activities within the regions the Canal will go through. For the French north region of Picardie, it will have an important social and economical impact. And this is not limited to France. That is why the European mission is interesting, because it will also strongly impact Wallonia, Flanders, and at a lesser extend also the Netherlands.

How will multi-modal platforms impact the local social and economical activities?

I think there will be a huge impact because barges will transport goods to the deep water ports through wide-gauge water transportation system. So, also the ports traffic will be affected. Many terminals will be developed in France and also in Flanders.

The Seine Nord Canal will strongly impact the local activities, and the biggest impact will be nearby the Canal, in the inlands, all around the multimodal logistics platforms. In Flanders, they are also building terminals close to Ghent and they are allocating these terminals to private companies. There will be a boost of construction all over. More importantly, this will enable the connection to the Dutch Maas and then to the Rhine network.

It is therefore understandable that everybody is looking forward to the official launch of the project Seine-Scheldt that will be given 420 M€ from the TEN-T budget. The project has been jointly presented by the French Government and the two Belgian Communities. The French government has taken the decision in principle, but the canal will only be realised if also the private part of the financing will be achieved. So Flanders and Wallonia want to be sure that this financial support will be confirmed before launching all the programmed works.

What are your targets in term of environmental impact?

Reaching environmental targets is not under the European Commission responsibility. The Project is under the responsibility of the French Government. The European Commission wants to support, with an enormous amount of money, the studies for the Canal in connection with the white book and the Naiades Program. The European Commission appointed coordinators for different complex projects with the mission to help solving problems, the responsibility of the projects remains in the hands of governments. Of course the countries are bound by European Environmental Directives.

How do you consider your personal task in this Project as TEN-T Waterway Coordinator?

I am working in close relation with ‘Voies navigables de France’. I am also talking with ministers for all the concerned countries. As an expert, I have not only the political authority, but also the technical approach to the inland waterways. The Netherlands have a tradition of centuries in the waterways, using them very intensively, more than the whole of Europe. France and Belgium will benefit more from the project than the Netherlands. That fact will add to the confidence in the Coordinator.

This project appears to be a real success story for Europe, because everyone has already a very dense road network, and the opportunity to transport more goods on waterways will not only spare a lot of money but also keep the landscape as beautiful as it is. This is an important criterion for the environmental groups. They consider that it is very important not to extend the road traffic. It is fantastic that these environmental groups are supporting the Project because that will really mean that the Canal will be done within a few years, and will not take almost a life time.
What will be the next steps of the Inland Waterways Program in Europe?

When I was appointed, the European Commission asked me to take special care of Priority projects Seine-Scheldt and the Rhine/Meuse-Main Danube as I put priority programs. One is the Seine-Scheldt link, and the second is the Danube Program.

The Danube Program is a gigantic work, because this river stretches for more than 3,000 km, and it will provide huge opportunities to the crossed regions. It is a difficult challenge and there is a lot of work to be done.

The key issue is that the two projects together will complete a real waterway network connecting Europe. Only the Mediterranean countries and the west side mainly, will not be affected. In a close future, there will be a waterway network linking Oural to the Mediterraneans and to the North Sea. You’ll no longer have to rely only on roads and railways.

Did the Danube Project already start?

Yes, it started with works in both Romania and Bulgaria. Romania has the task to do the waterworks. There is an important environmental issue that is under discussion, in that the infrastructural works may have an impact on the habitat of fishes, including the threatened sturgeons. Workshops have been organised to discuss with environmental groups. This project will connect all the new EU members’ states to the Black Sea. In a way it will also connect Turkey with Western Europe by inland waterways, and not only by sea.

It will enter in service in 2015-2017. The works that will connect Austria with the Black Sea will be achieved a little earlier in 2013. In the meantime, there are also other smaller projects, parts of this coordinated approach for the inland waterways.

A special message?

In conclusion, I would like to drive your attention on the importance of balanced economical, social and environmental aspects of such huge programs. All these aspects must be taken into proper consideration, particularly in relation to each other. Thus, these Trans-European programs will be clear opportunities for the development of our countries.