

Ladies and gentlemen,

Tomorrow's ceremony commemorates the 60th anniversary of the last great flood in the Netherlands. On February 1, 1953, a powerful storm caused a storm surge in the North Sea of such proportions that many dikes in the South-West of the Netherlands collapsed. Almost 2000 people died. In response to this disaster and in the firm belief that such a disaster could be avoided through human ingenuity and engineering works, the state drew up a plan for the future protection of the Netherlands against flooding.

The works that were designed and built on the basis of this Delta Plan were indeed a marvel of ingenuity and engineering, and have been acclaimed internationally as one of the seven modern wonders of the world. They were built to protect our country to the highest levels of safety in accordance with the possible consequences of another breach. The cost of these measures has been the insurance against an event that would have had a devastating effect on our country. The Netherlands is a small country and 60% of the land is vulnerable to flooding. Floods such as those recently experienced in New Orleans and New York, generated by storms, or caused by river water, as in Bangkok, show the catastrophic consequences of inundation by water. Serious flooding in the Netherlands would set us back for decades. This we simply cannot allow.

The work on our delta is never finished. The population living behind our dikes has grown in number since the Delta Plan was drawn up. So has capital investment, especially in flood-prone areas. As well as that, the climate is changing. We observe rising sea levels, and we see that our soil is subsiding, and that storm and rain patterns are changing. That is why the Dutch government decided in 2010 on a long term Programme, the Delta Programme, with two goals. To keep our country safe from flooding, both now and in the future, and to ensure that we are guaranteed a sufficient fresh water supply. This Delta

Programme is based on a Law, the Delta Act, which arranges both for the necessary funding for the measures to be taken, by setting up a Delta Fund, and for the appointment of a special functionary, the Delta Commissioner, to supervise the progress of the Programme. What is new about this Programme is that it was not initiated in response to a disaster, but in order to avoid a future disaster by working and thinking ahead.

It is this fact that offers us the opportunity to gain the most from the measures taken. Responding to a disaster, as in the past, and as we see time and again around the world, generates the political will, and an ability to take action quickly, often focussing on one goal: that is increased safety, preferably highly visible, and with an emphasis on concrete.

There is nothing wrong with concrete, but we have learned that large scale measures in highly interdependent and balanced natural systems often have far-reaching consequences, and we have learned that some of these are undesirable. Even as we were building the Delta Works, our thinking progressed. Ecological impact came into the equation, and measures were reconsidered. This is why the Oosterschelde Barrier came to be constructed in such a way that tidal influence and the brackish waters behind the barrier could be maintained. The idea to cut off the Waddenzee from the North Sea was utterly rejected, and with hindsight we must be grateful for that.

We have come to realise that the wetland systems that are at the core of our Delta perform many important functions, both economic and ecological. The ecological functions are economical, as is the whole Delta Programme. Therefore, the balance between the need for action, and the need to care for our environment responsibly, has become a significant part of the way in which we approach the challenge of a safe and habitable delta. This is why we have incorporated into the Delta Programme, where possible and cost-effectively, the concept of working with nature in our actions. That is, to use natural

processes in order to achieve water-safety in such a way that ecological values are respected as much as possible (as with the Sand Engine project), or to enhance the ecological value of a project (as with the strengthening of the Prins Hendrikdijk on the island of Texel), or completely to replace a traditional dike with a more natural concept, (as with the so-called Oeverdijk protecting the Markermeer, where a raised shoreline will provide the required safety).

It will come as no surprise that in times of budget cuts, the cost-effectiveness of such measures receives even more attention than usual. I look to the consortium "Ecoshape – Building with Nature", to increase the opportunities for natural safety measures by working on ways to achieve safety which not only contribute to ecological values, but also realise additional cost-savings. On the other hand, we must also be realistic. Large structural projects will also remain necessary to maintain our high level of water-safety. What is required is an open mind, to create opportunities for new methods that help to keep our task manageable.

Wetland services, that is, the systemic services that wetlands provide, do offer such opportunities by contributing to the avoidance of unwanted water and to the maintenance of the water supply as a buffer during periods of water scarcity. The restoration of local waterways, where water retention and water quality improvement go hand in hand with the enhancement of the ecological system, can also contribute to water-safety. The Onlanden project in the province of Drenthe was instrumental in keeping the city of Groningen protected in 2012. It showed how wetland restoration combines ecological and water management goals. In this way such projects can contribute directly or indirectly to the goals of the Delta Programme, that is, to water-safety and water-availability.

In this respect, the work of the Coalition of Natural Climate Buffers in combining water-safety, water-availability and water-

management issues with wetland restoration in the Netherlands deserves special mention. Indeed, the coalition is an important partner of the Delta Programme.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Delta Fund is dedicated to measures for water-safety and water-availability. Projects within the Delta Programme are in principle tailored to water-safety and availability, but this does not mean they exclude the realisation of other ambitions. On the contrary. One of the guiding principles of the Delta Programme is integrality. It is our aim to do as much as possible to integrate other spatial ambitions in our projects, and to enable the partners in the Delta Programme to realise their objectives where possible in combination with our water management goals. Funds from other sources can be incorporated to help finance such integral projects. The Delta Act specifically offers the opportunity for smart and easy connections.

My message, on the eve of the commemorative ceremony of the disaster in 1953, is that it is our common duty to protect ourselves against flooding and that we cannot jeopardize our safety. Working towards that end also opens up avenues to the realisation of other objectives. Wetland services can, in addition to their other ecological and economic functions, contribute to water-safety, water-quality, and water-availability and in this way help to realise the goals of the Dutch Delta Programme. To this end, the adroit combination of public and private financing, and the development of business cases which help generate ecological, water management and economic spin-offs are called for. I hope that today's discussions will lead to concrete actions that help to attain the realisation of such integrated projects.

I wish you a fruitful discussion.

