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SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

Directorate D
SG D.3 – Resource Efficiency

Brussels, 30 September 2014

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NOTE TO MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION

Subject: European Parliament. Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and Committee on Fisheries. Hearing of Karmenu Vella, Commissioner-designate for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries - Brussels, 29 September 2014.

Summary record

Despite previous negative echoes the hearing of Commissioner designate VELLA took place in a relatively friendly atmosphere, with the Commissioner-designate performing well in the first (ENVI) part and getting noticeably more at ease during the second (PECH) part. According to unofficial information ENVI and PECH decided to give a favourable opinion on Karmenu VELLA's confirmation but expressed a strong recommendation that environmental sustainability be included in the title and portfolio of Vice-President KATAINEN and that full implementation of 7th EAP be made an explicit task in the mission of VELLA.

During the first part of the hearing, members of the ENVI committee were less aggressive than foreseen on the environmental issues. Nevertheless, as expected, there were questions from 5 MEPs (Greens, S&D, ALDE) expressing concerns about the merging of ENV and MARE portfolios and the content of Commissioner-designate VELLA's mission letter. In reply to MEPs' questions Mr VELLA reassured that sustainability will be properly taken up in the EU agenda. The main other topics brought up by MEPs were circular economy/waste, biodiversity, and the air package. Commissioner-designate VELLA clarified that the review of the Birds and Habitats Directives does not automatically mean that they will be revised, and that air quality will be one of his immediate priorities.

During the second part of the hearing, PECH committee members asked more concrete questions, with less repetition than the ENVI members. This allowed Mr VELLA to give more specific answers proving that he had already well familiarised with the subject. The most pertinent issues the speakers enquired about included the imminent implementation of the CFP and its effect on small-scale fishing (in particular the landing obligation), driftnets and the multiannual plans. All MEPs concurred on the importance of maximum sustainable yield (MSY) in order to ensure sustainability. As the last speaker, Mr MATO ADROVER (EPP/ES) wished all the best to the Commissioner-designate, hinting that his group would support his confirmation.

Surprisingly, there were no personal questions addressed to the Commissioner-designate. The only questions concerned Malta on the topic of bird hunting, on which he reassured MEPs that all MS would be treated equally.

In his closing speech Commissioner-designate VELLA reiterated his priorities and added a very well received personal touch. He noted, showing a photo of his young grandchildren: "We do not inherit what we have from our parents, but we borrow it from our children ".

Next steps

Meetings of the coordinators of the ENVI and PECH committees took place immediately after the hearing. According to unofficial information ENVI and PECH decided to give a favourable opinion on Karmenu VELLA's confirmation but expressed a strong recommendation that environmental sustainability be included in the title and portfolio of Vice-President KATAINEN and that full implementation of 7th EAP be made an explicit task in the mission of VELLA.

[signed]

P. HANDLEY
Head of Unit

Further information:

– SG.D3

Questions from the ENVI Committee

In his introductory statement Commissioner-designate VELLA recalled his mandate and indicated his three priorities in the field of environment: Green Growth, protecting the natural capital on which sustainable growth depended and safeguarding the Union's citizens from environment-related pressures and risks to health. Work on all these priorities would require mainstreaming environment into all policy areas, working with Member States to promote compliance and maintaining the EU's international lead in environmental issues.

Portfolio / Sustainability: Matthias GROOTE (S&D/DE) noted that the portfolio did not cover only the environment, and the S&D group wondered how the Commissioner-designate would ensure that environment would be taken into account enough in his future work. Sustainability was very important for the ENVI Committee and this should be dealt at the level of Vice-President in the new Commission structure. He asked how the Commissioner-designate would guarantee that environment, resource efficiency and the green economy would be reflected in legislative work and given the priority they deserved. Commissioner-designate VELLA replied that he could sense concern about his portfolio and about the fact that environment had been added to fisheries. He made it clear that the MARE portfolio was not only about fisheries, it went well beyond that. It also included the governance of the ocean, which had many links with the environment. He underlined that the planet is made of 30% of land and 70% of ocean. Both portfolios could work together; they could reinforce rather than diminish each other. Speaking about the future, it was all about sustainability. The environment had got a lot to do with sustainable fishing and with sustainable economy. Both Commission services would be kept and there was not one portfolio moving at the expense of the other.

According to Gerben-Jan GERBRANDY (ALDE/NL) economic growth and jobs were impossible without sustainability; nevertheless both the President-elect's political guidelines and mission letter showed that in his view, sustainability stopped growth. He underlined that President-elect Juncker replied that sustainability was so self-evident that it was not necessary to mention it. He asked how Commissioner-designate VELLA could ensure that sustainability would be a cornerstone of the new Commission's growth agenda. Commissioner-designate VELLA read out loud one sentence from his mandate about "ensuring the sustainability of our environment, the preservation of our natural resources and the conservation of our marine biological resources". He agreed that we could not talk about economy without sustainability, but sustainability should not be seen as something hindering the economy; the environment should be pushing future development. For him the environment could be looked at as an end in itself or as a means to an end because it could help Europe in its future growth. The mandate for growth and jobs using policies for green and blue growth was exactly that. He would be guided by the 7th EAP which was totally dependent on future sustainability.

Bas EICKHOUT (Greens-EFA/NL) voiced strong concerns about the structure of the new Commission and how President-elect Juncker was downgrading environment concerns or was in favour of deregulation. He asked for concrete answers about how the Commissioner-designate would prioritise between environment and fisheries, for instance if there was an opposite opinion concerning the listing of Bluefin tuna in the appendix 1 of CITES. He also underlined that the 7th EAP was more than a "relevant framework" as it foresees which legislative initiatives should be put forward. He asked what the Commissioner-designate intended to do in the next 6 months about the proposals on access to justice, environmental inspections, the strategy on endocrine disruptors and the communication on sustainable food.

Commissioner-designate VELLA did not agree the Juncker administration was downgrading the environment; economy and sustainability went hand in hand. As regards Bluefin tuna, he underlined that decisions about quotas were never taken as a political decision but after getting the best available scientific advice. Concerning access to justice and other initiatives a lot of work had already been done by the Commission services. He would have to look into it because he was probably not enough informed about them. Regarding endocrines this had been passed over to the Commissioner-designate for health, but this did not mean it was not of interest to him. As to environmental inspections, it was still possible to revive those proposals but he would have to discuss with his services the way forward.

Benedek JÁVOR (Greens-EFA/HU) was of the view that in addition to the structural problem of merging the environment and fisheries portfolios as already mentioned, there was another structural problem in the new Commission: new initiatives could only be put on the agenda of the College if they were recommended by one of the Vice-Presidents. Mr VELLA depended on Vice-President KATAINEN for all initiatives in the field of environment and fisheries but there was no reference to environmental protection or sustainable development in his mandate. He asked how the Commissioner-designate would deliver the Treaty obligation to ensure sustainable development, high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment given that he depended on a Vice-President whose mandate did not include sustainability. Commissioner-designate VELLA acknowledged this was a concern as this had been discussed with every meeting he had with MEPs. However, he did not think it was that alarming. The principle of sustainable development was in the Treaty, so if President-elect Juncker were to mention it to just one Commissioner, that might be interpreted as it was that Commissioner who was entrusted with the responsibility for sustainability, whereas according to the Treaty all Commissioners have a responsibility towards sustainable development. Therefore, it would be hard to understand how any Commissioner would not have sustainability in mind when the first priority of each Commissioner is to defend the Treaty.

New initiatives: Claude TURMES (Greens-EFA/LU) said Mr VELLA was under instruction from President-elect Juncker not to commit to any new initiatives and worse, not to commit to maintaining existing legislation. If he had an attitude just to follow what a pro-business Commissioner would tell him, he would go nowhere. There was a need of somebody who commits. He asked about the intentions of Mr VELLA regarding environmental inspections, access to justice and air pollution. Commissioner-designate VELLA replied that if he did not give any commitment it was not because he had received any instructions to do so. He could not pretend to know everything and give commitments unless he was 100% certain that he would be able to deliver. The new Commission needed to take stock of what was left in terms of legislation. Taking stock was only natural, every new government did it. As regards the way forward he did not see a fight between economists and environmentalists. The environment could promote the economy. Maybe today we had an expired economy because when it was planned, environmentalists were not part of the planning. Now if we were planning economic policies for the future, environmentalists has to be part and parcel of the decision.

Birds and Habitats Directives: Ivo BELET (EPP/BE) asked about the evaluation of the Birds and Habitats Directives and a possible reform to prepare a merge into a modern piece of legislation. He indicated that the Maltese government weakened the interpretation of the Birds Directive as Mr VELLA was a member of it. Commissioner-designate VELLA made it very clear that he was neither a hunter nor a bird trapper, and that he condemned any illegal hunting. He also made very clear that he was not there as Commissioner for Malta but as a

Commissioner for the EU. With regard to the Birds and Habitats Directives or any other directive, abuse could not be tolerated. The Birds Directive was the cornerstone to safeguard EU ecosystems and biodiversity. It was adopted in 1979 and it had never been reviewed since then. Most of the interpretation of this directive came not from the directive itself but from some 30 court cases. Moreover, since 35 years science had made giant steps. So, reviewing was not revising and in anything he would do, he would consult.

Mark DEMESMAEKER (ECR/BE) asked how the modernisation of the Birds and Habitats Directives would come out. Commissioner-designate VELLA repeated that the decision to review the Birds and Habitats Directives did not mean any intention to deregulate. Reviewing the directives did not mean revising them, and there would be time to discuss this in more detail.

Catherine BEARDER (ALDE/RU) asked if Mr VELLA would use his position to force the Maltese government stop killing birds. Commissioner-designate VELLA replied that as former Minister of Tourism in Malta he realised that tourism, which represented one third of Malta's economy, depended 100% on the environment. He used to receive many complaints concerning birds, especially from the UK. Therefore, when talking about lack of control she was preaching to a converted; he would not defend anyone with regard to breaking any directives.

Timber / deforestation: Catherine BEARDER (ALDE/RU) referred to the EU Timber Regulation which came into force in 2013, but still many MS did not comply with it. 20% of greenhouse gas emissions resulted from deforestation, and in the EU 48 to 50 0000 square miles of land were lost annually. She asked whether the Commissioner-designate would ensure the Timber Regulation is implemented in a uniform way, what he would do in the area of deforestation. Commissioner-designate VELLA did not respond to this part of the question.

REFIT: Bolesław G. PIECHA (ECR/PL) asked how the Commissioner-designate would ensure a rigorous approach to REFIT, whether he would look for opportunities to improve quality and coherence of legislation taking account of work undertaken by MS, and whether he would take into account subsidiarity, proportionality and avoid unnecessary burden on business and in particular SMEs. Commissioner-designate VELLA underlined that REFIT was not a deregulation exercise. Its objective was to see how to make existing legislation more efficient and more coherent. He stressed that in the REFIT agenda, the objectives of legislation must remain. As work is ongoing there is a need to wait for the outcome of the Fitness Check before deciding on the options.

7th EAP / Semester: Susanne MELIOR (S&D/DE) referred to the 7th EAP setting out environment policies for the next 6 years and asked how the Commissioner-designate would ensure that its implementation is reflected in the European Semester so that MS are bound to it more than they used to be. Commissioner-designate VELLA acknowledged that the 7th EAP was a mandate because it had been co-decided by both EP and Council. With regard to ensuring that environment policies were mainstreamed into other areas and ensuring the greening of the Semester, this was the only way forward. There was a need to make certain that environment policies were integrated in any economic policy. A sustainable future meant the economy could not go north while the environment was going south; more mainstreaming was needed. This is why President-elect Juncker was talking about moving away from silo mentalities; environment should be everyone's responsibility.

Clean air package: Kateřina KONEČNÁ (GUE/CZ) referred to the clean air package and mentioned problems in border areas when one MS has an exception and the other one does not; this created problems because pollution had no borders. She asked how citizens would be protected against pollution from those MS that do not respect standards. Commissioner-designate VELLA acknowledged that some MS probably did not have enough finance to safeguard their citizens from environmental negative impacts. He agreed there was a different potential between MS, not all could safeguard to the same extent the environment for their citizens, but the EU could not compromise when it came to standards. The same level of protection should be guaranteed for all citizens over Europe and a level playing field was needed in terms of European standards. However, structural funds could be provided and MS requiring the more assistance should be supported. If MS could not apply EU standards, there were two ways to go about it: either to change them, or to help MS. The first approach should be to support these MS not only financially but also through roadmaps as the Commission is doing with some MS, or change them. Infringements could also be used.

Jørn DOHRMANN (ECR/DK) referred to the Air package tabled by Commissioner Potočnik which included targets for ammonia emissions reductions in 2020 and 2030. The environmental benefits were very modest, but some countries were set to reduce emissions by 4 times the EU average. In DK it was estimated that such policy would lead to loss of 11 000 job and 1 billion euros of agricultural exports. He asked Mr VELLA for his views about the high discrepancy in terms of burden sharing among MS. Commissioner-designate VELLA praised the work of Commissioner Potočnik. Air pollution had very negative effects socially, environmentally and economically. The EU had to act very fast because bad air quality had impacts on health and also on absenteeism at work, therefore having an economic impact. Services had been doing wonderful job at identifying sources (transport, agriculture, industry). A lot of monitoring / control was being done for national emissions ceilings, and the number of MEPs that raised this issue during previous meetings was a very good indication of the seriousness of this issue. This would be one of his first priorities. If he is confirmed he would have to see if the measures were going to have a negative economic effect such as the one mentioned.

Waste package: Françoise GROSSETETE (EPP/FR) referred to the legislative proposal on waste and waste packaging transmitted to EP and Council. Public policy needed to be based on reliable scientific knowledge but the methodology and statistical approaches were too disparate and not reliable enough, making a genuine comparison between MS impossible. She asked if it was Mr VELLA's priority to harmonise the way we measure MS performances before introducing new policy. Commissioner-designate VELLA agreed on the importance and the positive aspects of the circular economy. Before it was tabled the waste package went through a very accurate scientific cost-benefit analysis. As the proposal was awaiting the reactions from EP and Council, his assessment would have to be after the reactions from EP and Council. The Commissioner-designate noted that the waste package was one of best ways forward to make the best use of our resources, as it was addressing waste not only at the production stage but also at the consumption stage.

Endocrine disruptors: Jytte GUTELAND (S&D, SE) asked how the Commissioner-designate would deal with REACH and endocrine disruptors to protect human health. There was a proposal for criteria from Commission services a week ago, but could Mr VELLA promise a date for that proposal? Commissioner-designate VELLA underlined the issue related more to health, and the issue had been referred to the Commissioner for Health. He would work hand in hand with him because health was one of the priorities of the 7th EAP.

Implementation of environmental law: Karl-Heinz FLORENZ (EPP/DE) said the implementation of EU law was just not working; it was a disaster. Given the number of births, representing the whole population of Germany in one year, the circular economy has to be supported wholeheartedly. Commissioner-designate VELLA agree that implementation was the key challenge in the EU. This was exactly one of the priorities in the 7th EAP. He took the opportunity to point out that Malta had a very low number of open infringements (only 5) in the area of the environment, whereas many other countries had around 20 or more.

Use of EU funds / investments in green economy: Nessa CHILDERS (S&D/IE) asked Mr VELLA about his strategy for more efficient use of EU funds and investment in the green economy. Commissioner-designate VELLA referred to the € 300 billion package announced by President-elect Juncker, which could come from the EU budget, the EIB and investment from the private sector. He attached a lot of importance to this last element. No government could come up with an incremental number of jobs unless the private sector was involved. One way to entice the private sector to contribute towards this growth was to make funds available. Finance coming from the EU could be tied in with its environmental rules so that it supports sustainable economy.

Nicola CAPUTO (ALDE/IT) observed that the EU had ambitious objectives to achieve a circular economy, change our lifestyles and lead to structural changes. He asked Mr VELLA what instruments he intended to use to encourage investments in the private sector and to develop better opportunities at the production and consumption stages. He also asked what measures he would set in place to encourage MS in this direction and to promote investment in new technologies for integral management of waste. Commissioner-designate VELLA replied that in order to be incentivised towards the circular economy the private sectors needed to have the assurance that rules were not always changing; it needed stability. Secondly, in order to move into new areas of the economy, it needed a skilled labour force and access to finance. Most of the finance available was tied to traditional economy; As soon as someone came with new ideas, finance available got more limited. Giving the private sector adequate labour skills and access to finance to help marketing products was the best help to guide it towards the circular economy.

Bees: Mark DEMESMAEKER (ECR/BE) asked whether Mr VELLA agreed that bee mortality was an urgent issue and which measures he intended to take. Commissioner-designate VELLA acknowledged that the problem of pesticides killing bees was a very important issue, not only environmentally but also with regard to biodiversity. He shared the concerns that bees were protecting our food as well. This was of interest to his portfolio from the biodiversity side but not from the pesticides side, however he could work on this with the Commissioner for health. The problem was not coming only from the chemicals side. Other issues were harming bees, including agricultural issues mainly because many MS were opting for monoculture crops. As there was a ban of neonicotinoids in place for a period of two years, it was necessary to wait for the evaluation to see if it was effective or not before taking any further decisions.

Jytte GUTELAND (S&D, SE) also mentioned the importance of having a policy to protect bees. Commissioner-designate VELLA recalled that the Commission had already proposed some ways to avoid the eradication of bees.

Animal testing: According to Stefan ECK (GUE-NGL/DE) 50% of European citizens would like to see a dramatic reduction animal testing. Nevertheless millions of horrific tests were carried out every year in Europe. Animal testing for cosmetics had been prohibited. He asked if following on ban cosmetics, the Commissioner-designate would push for a ban on domestic products. Commissioner-designate VELLA acknowledged this was a very important question which merited a lot of attention. The EU did a first attempt with cosmetics and it was necessary to see what the outcome would be. He was not fully comfortable with this subject and did not have an opinion at this stage. He could certainly discuss this in more details with the services to see what they were proposing, what other NGOs were proposing, and to examine experiences in MS to share best practices. He offered to discuss this issue in more detail after his confirmation.

Cyanide in mining: György HÖLVÉNYI (EPP/HU) referred to an EP resolution from May 2010 asking the Commission ban cyanide in mining. However, the Commission had not yet acted and this caused a disaster in Romania. He asked what steps Mr VELLA intended to take as a follow-up to this EP resolution. Commissioner-designate VELLA recalled that there was a mining waste directive in place since 2008, under which cyanide was allowed in gold mining provided it was used under very strict conditions. No substitute had yet been identified, and a ban of cyanide would probably mean a ban of gold mining in EU. There were economic and environmental concerns. The Commission was monitoring the situation and may reassess its position in the light of future technical developments and risk assessments.

Shale gas: Boleslaw PIECHA (ECR/PL) asked what the Commissioner-designate would you so that the Commission's review of its recommendation for minimum principles on the exploration and production of hydrocarbons (such as shale gas) using high volume hydraulic fracturing in the EU takes account of adequate evidence of practical implementation and does not result in an unnecessary proposal for legislation? Would he be able to resist political and ideological pressure to introduce legislation at EU level if there was no real need for it? Commissioner-designate VELLA recalled that it was for the MS, not for the Commission, to decide on their own energy mix. His role would be, if any MS opted for shale gas, to ensure that any operation in that regard was done in accordance with the protection of the environment and according to Treaty. It was best to wait to see how MS were implementing the Commission guidelines and then possibly, knowing what the outcome would be, to decide on a way forward.

Oil extraction: Piernicola PEDICINI (EFDD/IT) referred to pollution in the waters in Croatia and Italy caused by heavy metals and other effluents. He asked which were the countries in infringement in this matter. Commissioner-designate VELLA acknowledged that oil extraction had an economic dimension and an environmental dimension. The decision on whether to authorise oil extraction or not laid with MS. The role of the Commission was to intervene if MS, when exercising the authorisation to extract oil, were not doing it in a manner in line with environment legislation. Various environment impact assessments had to be done in a serious manner. If a MS continued with its decision to extract oil, it had to abide by all environment rules; if it did not, the Commission was there to take the necessary action.

Seabed and deep-sea mining / marine protected areas: José Inácio FARIA (ALDE/PT) stated that under its Blue Growth agenda the Commission intended to support seabed and deep-sea mining. Yet there were large uncertainties regarding the environmental impact of such activities with regard to geomorphology, ecosystems and the impact on general marine

ecosystems. He asked what should be the role of the Commission in pushing forward an adequate legal framework for the environmental protection of international waters and marine protected waters in respect of seabed mining, and whether Mr VELLA intended to put forward initiatives for better management of marine protected areas. Commissioner-designate VELLA replied that the idea to have marine protected areas was already there, with the extension on the Natura 2000 network. We tended to take it for granted that limiting fishing to a maximum sustainable yield would solve everything. Other things harming the fish stocks, e.g. pollution in oceans and deep sea mining, also needed to be taken care of. Something would have to be done, but he needed to get acquainted more because this was really something needing a lot of thinking as it would affect a number of MS environmentally and economically. Environmental interests had to be kept at the forefront of these discussions, especially when talking about in areas where we had little experience, a precautionary approach was necessary.

Sharks: Marco AFFRONTI (EFDD/IT) asked about what precautionary measures the Commissioner-designate would take to protect the biological role of sharks and to ensure sustainability of shark fishing. Commissioner-designate VELLA replied that one of the best tools to use to look after sharks was the recently reformed CFP, in particular the landing obligation which would help to reduce the catches of sharks.

Marine research: In reply to a question from Francesc GAMBÚS (EPP/ES) about what he planned in terms of research & innovation for the protection of the maritime environment, Commissioner-designate VELLA declared that research would have to be one of the priorities in the area of maritime protection and maritime organisation. If we were going to touch our seas and oceans we needed to know more about them. Going into no man's land without any research or scientific data would be the worst thing to do. Research, innovation and scientific advice were imperative before we even started thinking about touching our oceans and seas.

Contribution: (SG.D3,)

Questions from the PECH Committee

In his introductory speech Commissioner-designate VELLA indicated the implementation of the new CFP as his key priority. The other two priorities are better international governance and blue growth.

IUU: In response to Mr MATO ADROVER (S&D/ES) and then to Mrs LOVIN (Greens/SE), Mr VELLA praised the work already done by Mrs DAMANAKI on IUU and confirmed that he is committed to apply the measures to fight against IUU as set in the new CFP. He also emphasised the need for a level playing field for all fishermen and committed to taking measures if fish exported to the EU was caught illegally. Mrs LOVIN also argued that more staff should be allocated to the Commission services dealing with IUU.

Bluefin tuna/ICCAT: Mr MATO ADROVER was also interested to hear more about the intentions of the Commissioner-designate regarding the possibility of TAC increase for Bluefin tuna from 2015. Mr VELLA stressed that any decision on increasing the quota on Bluefin tuna would not be influenced politically but would only be taken on the basis of “incontrovertible scientific evidence” confirming that the situation has improved.

Landing obligation: On the concerns of Mrs RODUST (S&D/DE) on the availability of information on how the landing obligation should be implemented, Mr VELLA emphasised that regionalisation has been one of the achievements of the CFP reform and is also the appropriate tools for fishermen to consider how to best implement the landing obligations.

Baltic Sea: After having replied to Mrs RODUST, who was echoed by Mr WALESIA (EPP/PL), that the multiannual plan on the Baltic Sea will be adopted shortly, Mr VELLA tackled the concerns of Mr GROBARCZYK (EPP/PL) on the future of the industrial fishing and the interaction of the herring and cod stocks and his, which in his view has led to the failure of the long term plan for cod in the Baltic. Mr VELLA agreed that there are different factors that affect the stocks, but advised that all TAC related decisions would always be based on the best possible scientific advice.

Multiannual Plans (MAPs): Mr VELLA praised the work of the Task Force on the MAPs and stressed that work on the MAPs will be a priority for him if confirmed. He once again emphasised that the regionalisation process would have a key role in the work on the MAPs given the regional differences across the EU.

Support for Small-Scale Fishermen (SSF): In reply to Mr FERREIA (GUE/PT) on the management of the small-scale and artisanal fishing, the Commissioner strongly emphasised the contribution of SSF to environmental sustainability and job creation in the EU. He clarified that the CFP, and in particular the EMFF, provide a number of support mechanisms for SSF such as training, access to financing, etc. and thus his priority if confirmed would be to make sure that the allocated resources are used in the best possible way. Mr WALESIA raised concerns regarding the burden of the environment legislation on the SSF and the coastal community as whole. Mr VELLA stressed many times that sustainability in EU law implies not only environmental but also socio-economic sustainability, thus the interest of SSF should also be taken into consideration when adopting environmental legislation.

MSY: The Commissioner-designate highlighted that reaching MSY levels as soon as possible, and no later than 2020, would be a top priority for the future Commission. In reply to Mrs LOVIN, he clarified that only then should reaching stock levels above MSY be prioritised.

Data collection: The Commissioner-designate concurred with Mrs NI RIADA (GUE/NGL/IE) on the need to improve data collection and dissemination. He noted that improvements could be achieved through the EMFF, and also through regionalisation.

SFPAs: Mr VELLA underlined that SFPAs are transparent and respectful of sustainability, and committed himself to respecting the CFP principle of allowing access of EU fleet only to the surplus of the fish stocks in the waters of the SFPAs partner countries and refuted the qualification of these agreements by Mr FINCH (EDFF/UK) as a new form of colonialism. In reply to specific questions on the SFPAs with Mauritania and Morocco by Mr MILLAN MON (EPP/ES) and then Mrs AGUILERA (S&D/ES), Mr VELLA also acknowledged the importance of the individual SFPAs for the different member states. Moreover, The Commissioner-designate re-iterated that scientific data should serve the basis of the SFPAs.

Driftnets: Mr FINCH (EDFF/UK) took a critical stance on the introduction of a full ban on driftnets in the UK, which in his view would be the result of the failure of EU policy in the Mediterranean and would have a significantly negative impact on the UK coastal communities. Mr VELLA acknowledged the concerns of many PECH Members on the

driftnet ban matter. If confirmed, he committed to hear all views and to consider the positions of all stakeholders involved. He advised, also in response to Mrs BRIANO (S&D/IT) that the interinstitutional talks on the proposal are about to begin, which gives the institutions the chance to adopt a final text which takes into consideration the best environmental and socio-economic interests of EU citizens and business, even if this does not necessarily mean a total ban of the driftnets.

Pulse fishing: Mrs SCHREIJER-PIERIK (EPP/NL) asked a question about new methods of capture like electronic pulse fishing, this being a very specific issue in her home country. Mr VELLA showed understanding towards the problems underlining, nevertheless, that there are contradicting views about the effects and benefits of pulse fishing even between NGOs.

State Aid: Mr VELLA while emphasising on the need for level playing field for all EU fisherman, readily promised to Mrs GODDYN (EDFF/FR) to come back to her with more information on the state of play on state aid for fleets and tax exemption on fuel.

Fleet competitiveness: On a question of Mrs THOMAS (S&D/FR) on how would he deal with neighbouring and third country which are less stringent on sustainability than the EU and which thus are more competitive than the EU fleet, Mr VELLA agreed that this is an issue of major importance for EU fishermen. He highlighted that intense cooperation and dialogue are the only ways forward, along with the strict application of concluded agreements.

In the context of the questions raised by Members of ENVI Committee (see above) on fisheries related topics, Mr VELLA replied to Mr AFFRONTÉ (EDFF/IT) on the precautionary measures to be taken in order to make shark fishing sustainable. He mentioned that some measures of the new CFP will make it possible to reduce catch, particularly the landing obligations and discards ban. In reply to Mr TURMES (Greens/LU), who sought more information on the intentions of the Commissioner-designate on the introduction of marine protected areas and on his views on legislation on seabed and deep-sea mining, Mr VELLA highlighted that the measures to protect the stocks should be holistic and take into consideration not only the MSY but the marine environment as a whole. He said there is a lot of work and analysis that should be done in the area of seabed mining.

Contribution: (MARE.F2,), (SG.D3,)

Questions from the TRAN Committee

All three speakers enquired about Blue growth and its impact on jobs, tourism and the environment. **Mrs VOZEMBERG (EPP/EL)** asked how the Commissioner-designate would ensure the creation of jobs and thus strengthening the coastal regions of the EU. In his reply, Mr VELLA underlined the role of the private sector in creating jobs and of the public sector in facilitating this procedure. While noting that employment did not fall under his remit, Mr VELLA reassured Mr **KYRKOS (ALDE/EL)** that both Green and Blue growth would entail the social element underpinned by sustainability. **Mrs MEISSNER (ALDE/DE)** referred to the Maritime spatial planning and the cumbersome inter-institutional process with the Council as member states were reluctant to exchange data. The Commissioner-designate emphasised the importance of marine research as the basis for long-term planning.

Contribution: (SG.D3,

Closure

In his closing speech, Commissioner-designate VELLA thanked MEPs for the very frank and open discussion, and for the great number of questions which was also an indication of importance and size of his portfolio. He expressed the hope that he had convinced them of his sincerity in carrying out this task and of his wish for close cooperation with them in carrying out his duties. He reminded MEPS of his six priorities and said he needed the support of MEPs to achieve progress in these areas. He finished his speech with a personal note, referring to his parents who used to be his heroes when he was a child, as he always looked at them as they were the ones giving him access to the planet. Both passed away and Mr VELLA said he now had two super-heroes, showing MEPs a picture of his grandchildren. What he inherited from his parents he had every obligation to pass on to them in a better form. He ended his speech by saying: "We do not inherit the planet from parents but we borrow it from our children". He asked MEPs to help him work towards that objective.