

Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety
Committee on Fisheries
The Chairs

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CONFIDENTIAL

Mr Antonio TAJANI
Chair of the Conference of
Committee Chairs
PHS 8B043
Brussels

Dear Mr TAJANI,

The Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and the Committee on Fisheries, in accordance with Rule 125 of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament, held a public hearing on Thursday 3 October 2019 with Mr Virginijus Sinkevičius, Commissioner-designate, who, subject to the positive outcome of the nomination procedure, will be responsible for Environment and Oceans. The Common Fisheries Policy being a cornerstone of his responsibilities regarding Oceans.

On 1 October the ENVI Committee and the PECH Committee, pursuant to Rule 125 of the Rules of Procedure and Article 2 of Annex VII thereto, received the letter by the JURI Committee regarding the scrutiny of the declaration of financial interests of Mr Sinkevičius.

Prior to the hearing, Parliament had sent the Commissioner-designate a list of written questions. Our committees considered that Mr Sinkevičius answered those questions and dealt with the priorities outlined satisfactorily.

The course of the hearing

Mr Sinkevičius opened the hearing by stating that, if confirmed, his main objective would be to adopt a Green Deal that works for oceans, for the environment, and for EU citizens. He also recalled the high expectations of citizens, who are calling for the EU to take strong action against climate change.

Furthermore, Mr Sinkevičius mentioned the following priorities: setting a global target for biodiversity protection, promoting a transition towards a circular economy, achieving a level of zero pollution, fully implementing the Common Fisheries Policy, fighting against illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing, contributing to the Farm to Fork strategy by promoting sustainable seafood, and developing a new approach for a sustainable blue economy.

The introductory statement of Mr Sinkevičius was followed by a first round of 14 questions from representatives of each political group of both committees and a second round of 11 questions by Members, including also a representative from the non-attached Members.

Members asked questions on the following subjects in particular:

In the specific field of Environment

Concerning the **biodiversity strategy for 2030**, Members asked how the Commissioner-designate would ensure that the potential of forestry to tackle climate change is fully taken into account and that it achieves a good balance between forestry management and protection of biodiversity. They also asked about the funding of the strategy, the nature of the policies that would be included in it and if the strategy would include binding targets. Members also raised concerns about the presence of certain species, such as large carnivores (wolves, bears), in various areas of Europe, and the uneven implementation of the Habitat Directive across the EU. Mr Sinkevičius' was also asked about his strategy ahead of the upcoming COP of the Convention on biodiversity. (CBD) in China. Furthermore, Members asked what he would do to limit deforestation.

Regarding the **zero pollution ambition**, Members invited the Commissioner-designate to express his priorities for the improvement of air quality in Member States and his future plans for EU air quality policy, mentioning local "clean air zones", stricter criteria for Euro 7 vehicles, and diesel cars. Several Members also expressed concern about marine litter and plastic pollution. They asked Mr Sinkevičius' approach concerning microplastics, biodegradable plastics and over-packaging, asking whether he would introduce quantitative targets to reduce plastic packaging waste. Furthermore, Members invited the Commissioner to explain how he would limit exposure of vulnerable population to hazardous chemicals, particularly to endocrine disruptors, and whether he would deliver a non-toxic environment strategy. Moreover, Members asked whether Mr Sinkevičius' was planning to put forward new legislation on the environmental impact of pharmaceutical products. There was also a question on the follow-up on the objections adopted by the Parliament concerning REACH authorisations.

As far as a **circular economy** is concerned, Members asked about the measures that would be included in the new circular economy action plan and if Mr Sinkevičius was ready to introduce eco-design measures to tackle microplastics pollution. Furthermore, Mr Sinkevičius was asked among other things how he would link the zero pollution ambition and the promotion of a circular economy, and how he would support the development of non-toxic material cycles.

Among transversal issues, there were also questions on how Mr Sinkevičius would address the “one in-one out” principle and how he would promote the use of green procurement.

In the specific field of Oceans

Concerning the marine ecosystems the Members expressed their concerns on the way to tackle the degradation of oceans due to climate change as forecasted by the IPCC report on Oceans and cryosphere. The negative impact of human activities on oceans as the disruptive effects of noise on cetaceans or the specific impact of water pollution from tourism activities in the Arctic have been also cited.

In the specific field of Fisheries

Several Members of the Fisheries Committee raised strong concerns on the absence of the word “Fisheries” in the title of Mr Sinkevičius’ portfolio and requested it to be explicitly added.

Members focused questions on the new European and Maritime Fisheries Fund, particularly the overall budget, the financing of new vessels and its regionalization.

Brexit and the need for a future balanced agreement with reciprocal the access to markets, to waters and resources, was also in focus.

Many questions targeted the socio-economic dimension of Fisheries, the need to ensure economic viability and fair living conditions for fishermen/women and coastal communities, notably measures to promote small-scale fisheries, the outermost regions, and the creation of employment and conditions for generational renewal.

On the Mediterranean and Baltic Sea, Members asked specific questions on immediate actions to be taken to resolve incumbent problems related to overfishing or the closure of fisheries.

Individual questions were further asked on the issue of marine litter and fish predators, traceability and labelling of seafood products and information to consumers.

In his replies, Mr Sinkevičius made specific commitments regarding his future action as Commissioner.

In the specific field of Environment

The Commissioner-designate committed to:

- defending a higher budget for biodiversity protection in the College;
- addressing biodiversity protection in a holistic way, including by setting up measurable targets covering all sectors concerned, such as transport, agriculture and industry, as well as to improve monitoring systems in order to make a proper follow up;

- promoting a deforestation-free supply chain, by addressing forest degradation through various measures, including tracing the production chain, introducing proper labelling of products and making sure Member States have good forestry management plans in place;
- proposing a new Environmental Action Plan;
- adopting a zero-pollution environmental action plan, including measures for clean air, clean water and a non-toxic environment strategy;
- enhancing assistance to Member States to adjust their policies in order to meet the air pollution targets, and aligning them with the latest WHO recommendations;
- when asked about recalling diesel vehicles from the market in the aftermath of the dieselgate, he stressed the need to use the new type-approval framework to avoid a new scandal and support innovation in the car industry, in order to improve its competitiveness;
- adopting a new action plan on the circular economy that will reduce waste and make sure that the design of products takes a non-toxic circular approach, in line with the zero-pollution ambition;
- implementing a zero tolerance approach with regard to the non-compliance of any EU environmental legislation, particularly concerning air quality and biodiversity;
- addressing microplastics in pellets, tyres and textiles, establishing clear criteria for biodegradable plastics, and tackling over-packaging;
- prohibiting endocrine disruptors in toys, cosmetics and food contact materials, and giving them equivalence with CMRs;
- listening to and following scientific advice;
- ensuring that the “one-in, one-out” principle will not lead to the lowering of environmental protection.

ENVI coordinators take note of these commitments.

In the specific field of Oceans

Concerning the decline of fish stocks, the Commissioner-designate pointed out that, this is not only related to fisheries activities but also to the decline of marine ecosystems health due to pollution and climate change. The Biodiversity strategy 2030 will include coastal areas, seas and oceans.

Moreover, oceans are playing a key role on climate change through the absorption of CO₂ and now as source of clean energy. In 2022 a review of the CFP will be undertaken but as this is a sectorial regulation, Mr Sinkevičius stressed the need to address the health of oceans also through the Biodiversity Strategy and in the broader context of the Green Deal.

Taking into account the several fronts on which we have to act to preserve the oceans the Commissioner-designate noted that his portfolio has everything that is needed to tackle the causes that put in peril the oceans such as biodiversity loss, pollution (especially from

marine litter and nutrient run-offs) and shipping waste. He clearly recognizes that he will need to engage with industry as well as agriculture for the nutrient issue. Mr Sinkevičius also underlined that cooperation with the EP will be needed to set the targets that will be part of the Biodiversity Strategy.

At global level the Commissioner-designate committed himself to seek the involvement of international and regional partnerships, particularly through Advisory Councils and RFMOs, for example for the Mediterranean basin, for the restoration and protection of marine environment and also to stop IUU fishing activities.

He further specified to cooperate with the Trade Commissioner to reach a global agreement on the ban of harmful fishing subsidies.

In the specific field of Fisheries

He expressed his priority to achieve the full implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and its evaluation by 2022, insisting that the CFP should work for fishermen, coastal communities and the environment alike.

He recalled that the status of stocks relies not only on the fisheries activity, but on all the impacts on marine ecosystems. He highlighted the role of overfishing in some Sea basins, the insufficient number of Marine Protected Areas and the role of pollution and climate change. All these issues should be tackled in the framework of the biodiversity strategy.

In order to ensure a level playing field with imported fishery products, and improve labelling and traceability of fish and seafood product, he suggested the use of digital technologies.

He reassured Members that he would care about the wellbeing of fishermen and women and stressed that the successful transition to sustainable fisheries is based on the determination of the fishermen, who must play a key role in the ecological transition. However, he did not provide any information on specific measures to promote the socio-economic dimension of fisheries sustainability.

In the event of Brexit, he reassured Members that the EU is prepared but didn't provide further details.

He stated that the EMFF has to be in line with the objectives of the sustainable development strategy and the CFP objectives. Nevertheless, he did not provide for guarantees on maintaining the current appropriations for the EMFF.

Before the end of the hearing, the Commissioner-designate made a brief closing statement in which he reaffirmed that he would work to ensure that Europe leads on the transition to a healthy planet and to make sure we become the first climate-neutral continent.

He underlined that he will ensure the policies under his mandate will contribute to a fairer society that leaves no citizen behind.

He expressed his wish to work with the European Parliament to deliver on his ambitious agenda and to ensure a just transition, with benefits enjoyed by all.

Assessments of the ENVI and PECH Committees

On the basis of the responses of the Members present at the hearing, as well as the comments made by our committees' coordinators, who met in camera after the hearing under our chairmanship, we hereby give the following assessment:

Environment

As for Mr Sinkevičius' adequacy for the position, the coordinators considered that he has the necessary professional and political experience to master the challenges the position of a Member of the European Commission bring with it.

In his hearing Mr Sinkevičius demonstrated good knowledge of the main priorities on the specific areas of his portfolio: aiming for an ambitious EU biodiversity strategy and a goal on biodiversity to be agreed at global level, promoting a more circular economy, and achieving the zero-pollution ambition. He also showed a positive attitude towards the environmental agenda and readiness to cooperate with Parliament.

According to a large majority of ENVI coordinators, in the environment field, the outcome of this hearing is that the Commissioner-designate gave a satisfactory impression of his ability to be a member of the College of Commissioners and to carry out the specific tasks assigned to him.

Oceans

According to ENVI and PECH coordinators, in the fields of oceans, the outcome of this hearing is that the Commissioner-designate gave a satisfactory impression of his ability to be a member of the College of Commissioner and to carry out specific tasks assigned to him.

Fisheries

The PECH coordinators continued to raise concerns and to be of the strong opinion that Fisheries should be added to the responsibilities of Mr Sinkevičius as part of the title of his portfolio. Indeed, the conservation and the sustainable exploitation of marine biologic resources under the Common Fisheries Policy is one of the few exclusive competence of the Union.

PECH coordinators are in a position to confirm that Mr Sinkevičius is a qualified candidate with the independence, professional aptitude and European commitment necessary to perform his duties.

On the basis of his performance they are confident about his capacity to master his portfolio and to cooperate loyally with our committees.

According to the PECH coordinators, in the fields of fisheries, the outcome of this hearing is that the Commissioner-designate gave a satisfactory impression of his ability to be a member of the College of Commissioners and to carry out the specific tasks assigned to him.

This represents the opinion of a large majority of the PECH Members who attended the hearing.

General outcome of the hearing

The general outcome of this hearing is that the Commissioner-designate gave a convincing impression of his aptitude to be a member of the College of Commissioners and to carry out the specific tasks assigned to him. In this context, PECH coordinators reiterated their request to include the word "Fisheries" in the title of his portfolio.

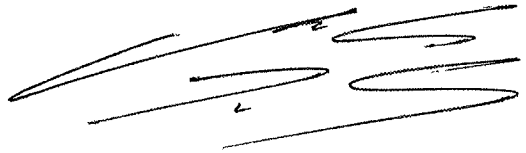
In accordance with Rule 125 of the Rules of Procedure and Article 4 of Annex VII thereto, our coordinators with a majority of two-third decided to approve that the Commissioner-designate Mr Sinkevičius, is qualified both to be a member of the College of Commissioners and to carry out the specific tasks assigned.

During the evaluation meeting, Sylvia Limmer, on behalf of the ID coordinator, requested to include the following aspects which constitute a minority view: in addition to the purely formal suitability of the candidates, the main focus for the ID Group is on substantive issues. In terms of content, the candidate was far from convincing us. On the one hand we got the impression at the hearing that Mr Sinkevičius has failed to answer many questions or expressed himself very evasively. Particularly unsatisfactory was his reaction regarding the wolf problem. To simply reduce the topic wolf, which is not an endangered species, to a "coexistence" and the "sensibilisation of the people" for the wolf, does not do justice to the problem at all. On the other hand, we have a much more fundamental problem. The Green Deal, which is to be accompanied by a massive expansion of wind energy can never be compatible with environmental and species protection. Offshore wind turbines destroy valuable coastal areas, contribute to the noise pollution of the oceans and destroy resting places for migratory birds. They also contribute significantly to environmental degradation and species extinction on land. Anyone who, like Mr. Sinkevičius, speaks of the "sixth mass extinction" and a Biodiversity strategy must have answers. Those who propagate a zero-pollution and non-toxic environment must deal with lead and cadmium in the solar panels, the rare earths metals in the wind turbine generators and the so far unresolved disposal of solar and wind turbine waste. This was not the case. Therefore, the ID Group will not support the candidacy of Mr. Sinkevičius.

Yours sincerely,



Pascal Canfin
Chair of the ENVI Committee



Chris Davies
Chair of the PECH Committee