

Ladies and gentlemen,

Most of us have had the postman deliver a package to our door at one time or another. For me opening the box is a magical moment.

In December, the European Commission presented its proposals for making the transition to a circular economy.

The name of this conference – 'Unwrapping the Package' – is fitting. After all, that's what we'll be doing here in Rotterdam: unwrapping the European Commission's package.

This will take place in a building where the scent of coffee, tea and tobacco used to fill the air. This former factory is now a multifunctional building.

So it is the ideal place for us to discuss the circular economy. Today we have heard about plenty of good ideas.

Here are just a few examples:

A Hungarian company that produces clean ethanol and cattle feed from maize.

Spanish and Italian companies that recycle building materials.

And a Norwegian company that gives old fishing nets a second life by using them to make carpeting and clothing.

To me, carpets and trousers made from fishing nets are not just some hip marketing concept. These are products that

really contribute to the green economy.

I am happy to note that more and more businesses believe in the importance of using raw materials and energy sources in a smart and responsible way.

Raw materials are becoming scarcer and fossil fuels are damaging the climate. Last December a historic climate accord was reached in Paris.

The agreements that we made reflect our desire and the need to stop global warming. So the transition to a circular economy is a smart choice. Not only because of the scarcity of raw materials.

But also because it will help us achieve our climate goal – to keep global warming well below two degrees Celsius. Many people believe that sustainability costs money.

But this simply isn't the case. Circular economy creates new markets, jobs and economic growth.

After all, why would you buy expensive raw materials – which are only getting more expensive – if recycled materials are much cheaper and better for the planet?

In addition to the 3 examples I mentioned, you have seen a lot of wonderful sustainable initiatives today.

I'm sure that all 30 of them will make a valuable contribution to the circular economy!

But, of course, I'm here to make a contribution too.

So I'd like to add a 31st example. In the Netherlands you are never far from water.

Take a look outside. We have plenty of water to drink and extensive inland waterways.

But our water purification systems could also play a role in the green economy by filtering valuable raw materials from waste water.

Because, however smelly it is: sewage sludge is a source of valuable raw materials.

Like phosphate, which we currently source from abroad. From Morocco, Syria or China, for instance. Global demand is increasing considerably.

But the quality of the phosphate supply is declining. And it's mined in countries where war is raging. Like Syria.

But luckily there's an alternative.

Thanks to smart innovations, we can now recover phosphates from sewage sludge and manure. It's cheaper and reduces the need to mine scarce resources. It's also better for the environment.

It means phosphates don't simply disappear: they're given a second life.

The Netherlands is a world leader in phosphate recovery. And so our waste water purification systems are also raw

material factories.

As European Commissioner Frans Timmermans neatly puts it, 'Trash is cash.'

I'll admit, sometimes you need more than a good idea and smart technology. We need to take the circular economy to the next level. This is an important commitment of the Dutch Presidency. I'm pleased that the European Commission presented its proposals for the circular economy in December.

It includes a legislative package on waste. And an action plan describing what the Commission will be doing over the next 5 years to build up a market in Europe in which raw materials are recycled.

I'm happy that the European Commission is taking a broad approach that includes waste, raw materials recovery, design, production and consumption. Waste remains a crucial point.

What do we define as waste in 2016? What an inspector would classify as waste material, a business owner may want to use as a raw material. A good example is recycling building materials, as I mentioned earlier.

It is important for us to tackle this together.

Of course we need to take differences into account. After all, there are pioneers and followers. Sometimes legislation is needed. Sometimes green growth needs to be stimulated by public-private partnerships or funding.

But everyone stands to gain from this. I can imagine that you also have questions about the European Commission's package.

Will it bring about the changes we are looking for? Over the next 6 months you will have general opportunities to see some good examples.

I cordially invite you to attend the Innovation Expo on the 14th of April in Amsterdam.

But this afternoon I want to hear what you need from Europe. I'll pass on your questions and needs to my European colleagues. And we will discuss how to collaborate more within Europe.

We will be satisfied if the Council issues an ambitious statement in the near future in which the EU member states declare their intention to begin building the circular economy. The European Commission and the member states can then get to work on the action plan.

Ladies and gentlemen,
I would like to conclude my remarks by paying a big compliment to everyone who has presented their sustainable initiatives today.

Continuing with the package delivery metaphor, every good idea is like a package that is waiting to be unwrapped.

We have seen a wealth of sustainable ideas and that bodes well for the future of Europe and the planet.

I encourage you to inspire others to join the club of countries where recycling raw materials is the norm.

That way, what is currently an exclusive group will grow into a popular movement. And everyone is welcome!

Sometimes opportunities can be found on the street corner. In the corn field. On the seabed. Or even in a smelly sewer.

I hope this meeting inspires you and serves as an effective springboard for advancing the circular economy in Europe.

Thank you.