

Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen

Speech at the press conference for the first working day of the European Chemicals Agency
1 June 2007

Honourable Vice-President of the European Commission, Mayor of Helsinki, Director-General,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This day marks an important event in the joint history of Finland and the European Union. We are proud to be able to say that we have made this true together, through our joint efforts. The task of the European Chemicals Agency, the work of which begins today, is to promote, within its own sphere of activity, the security of people and the environment and to improve the competitiveness of the European chemicals industry.

We Finns and the Finnish Government find such objectives easy to support. The beginning of the work of the Chemicals Agency offers concrete and living proof of the work of the European Union and its positive impact on the everyday life of people in Finland.

Three and half years ago, in mid-December 2003, the situation wasn't clear at all.. The question relating to the location of a number of EU agencies had been under discussion for some two to three years, without results. We Finns had been led to understand that a certain other agency would be set up in Finland. In March 2003, even this had, for a while, seemed to have been settled. However, during autumn 2003, the general feeling was that the issue could not even be put up for discussion before the Irish Presidency in spring 2004.

On the eve of the December 2003 European Council meeting, the Italian Presidency and certain other Member States indicated that the matter would not be placed on the agenda and would be postponed for a later summit.

We were, however, prepared to discuss the issue in its entirety during the December European Council in 2003. We had drawn up a thorough analysis of the whole agency package and assessed the suitability of various options for Helsinki. Although we officially still opted for the European Food Safety Authority, we were prepared to approve of a politically acceptable global solution and welcome the Chemicals Agency to Helsinki.

Although Finland, on the basis of the problematic discussions relating to the future seat of the European Food Safety Authority, had every reason not to accept the Presidency's package solution, we considered it politically advisable to break the deadlock by accepting to host the Chemicals Agency. I thought it an appropriate time to apply the proverb which says that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

This enabled the EU to proceed on a wide front and we took a calculated risk as, at the time, the future of the REACH regulation and its timetable remained rather unclear and uncertain.

I also wanted to approach the matter from a general angle: A continuation of the futile dispute on the location of the EU agencies would only harm the Union's interests when, at the same time, a great number of more difficult files were to be dealt with.

The solution adopted has proved a success. The meeting was able to make a decision on the placement of a total of ten new agencies. Among them was one of the EU's largest, the European Chemicals Agency, which today begins its work in its host town Helsinki.

Discussions on the REACH regulation, however, had only started and this created some uncertainty. It was even feared at times that the whole project might be delayed for several years. But our estimate that the legislative package could be adopted in 2006, or in early 2007 at the latest, proved correct.

During our Presidency last year, we were able to work towards the adoption of this, by far the EU's largest, legislative project over the recent years. I take this opportunity to thank the political decision makers and public officials in the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission and the Finnish state administration who with great skill and determination worked towards the finalisation of the project.

With the decision on the location having been made, we immediately started preparations for the establishment of the Chemicals Agency in Helsinki. In addition to internal administrative preparation, a working group was set up bringing together high-level representatives from the state administration, the City of Helsinki, the University of Helsinki and industrial life.

From the beginning, the underlying principle has been that Finland will make all necessary efforts to guarantee the agency a smooth start in Helsinki. We are fully aware of the agency's great challenge to attract leading European experts to Helsinki and we have been ready to offer our assistance in achieving this goal.

We opened web pages providing information for all those interested in the Chemicals Agency and in working there. We also published related brochures. Finland also hosted a number of chemicals-related meetings and this gave us an opportunity to present our country and its capital to the specialists attending those meetings.

In an early stage, the search for suitable premises was launched in cooperation with the Commission. Following thorough mapping and tendering, a lease on these premises was signed a bit more than a year ago. Since work on the REACH regulation was still under way and therefore, neither the agency nor the Commission could commit itself to the lease, the Finnish Government came to the rescue and became a signatory to the lease for a fixed period of time.

As the agency starts its work today and is soon to have its own budget, rental expenses to Finland will remain relatively low. The lease will be transferred to the agency as soon as the agency has the appropriate decision making bodies and authorisations. Without Finland's input, the start-up would have been more problematic.

An important EU agency is of great significance to Helsinki and the whole of Finland. The agency will bring hundreds of public officials from various parts of the European Union to Finland. This will contribute to life in the Helsinki region in a number of ways. As the agency will host a great many meetings, hotels and restaurants in Helsinki, for example, will receive a large number of new customers.

Finland and Helsinki wish the agency and its personnel a warm welcome to our country and this welcome extends beyond today, as we want to do our best to make you feel at home also in the years to come.

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Honourable Vice-President, Director-General, Ladies and gentlemen

I wish to thank you personally, Mr Vice-President, and the Commission as a whole, for your efforts and excellent cooperation. It is a great pleasure to be able to share this significant day with you.

I extend my thanks to all those who contributed to the success of the agency project. There is a great deal of work to be done but, with this positive start, I am convinced that everything will go as planned in the future, too.

I wish the European Chemicals Agency and its personnel every success in its important work.