Mr Chairman,

As a Swedish Social Democrat, it is a real pleasure for me to join my colleague Neil Kinnock at the British Labour Party Conference.

As European Commissioner for the Environment, it is also a pleasure to speak at this workshop on enlargement and the environment. I look forward to answering any questions you may have on this or other issues during our question and answer session.

The enlargement of the European Union is approaching its finale. The Union has announced its readiness to welcome the first new Member States in 2004. The journey has at times been rocky. But, looking back a lot has been achieved since the accession negotiations on environment were launched.

The challenges of the enlargement for the candidate countries are significant, but the EU directives also bring very important benefits.

Putting the EU directives into practice is about much more than just fulfilling the accession criteria. Up-grading the national environmental norms to match EU requirements will reduce air pollution, bring better quality of drinking water for millions and improve waste management. It will eliminate the worst health hazards and improve people’s living environment, for instance by reducing respiratory diseases. This is particularly important for exposed groups such as children.

These benefits are very real. If we do not take them into account we will never have a complete understanding of the true effects of enlargement.

That’s why the Commission financed a study on the benefits that the candidate countries can expect from EU environmental policy.

Its main results are, I believe, truly remarkable.

The study confirms that all candidate countries will reap significant benefits from EU environmental directives. The total value of these benefits could range from 134 to 681 billion euro for the period of 1999-2020 or 12 to 69 billion euro annually.

The main benefits from EU directives are clearly from improved public health. It is a fact that air pollution causes respiratory diseases, even premature deaths. According to the study, reaching EU air standards will reduce the number of cases of chronic bronchitis in the candidate countries by between 43,000 to 180,000. In addition, some 15,000 to 34,000 premature deaths could be avoided.
Moreover, the health benefits from better air quality are not limited to the candidate countries. Pollution in the air or in the waterways, just like so many other environmental problems, travels freely across national borders.

For the EU, less air pollution from the candidate countries could imply public health benefits worth 6.5 billion euro annually. This is also the case for countries such as Russia, Ukraine or Belarus that can all expect cleaner air.

Environmental investments and more modern technology will improve economic efficiency and boost companies' productivity. For industry, more efficient waste management brings savings, and better water quality means lower production and maintenance costs, as equipment will no longer be damaged by dirty water.

But let's not forget the environmental advantages the candidate countries can currently boast. The candidate countries will also make an important environmental contribution to the EU. Many candidate countries still enjoy well-functioning public transport systems. They should be encouraged to maintain and up-grade these. This may of course be difficult in the face of demands for more private car ownership as living standards rise.

Central and eastern European countries also still have animal and plant species that are rare or extinguished in western Europe. They host wetlands and forests that are remarkable on an international scale.

In the future, these animals and nature sites will enjoy the protection of the EU nature legislation.