



**United States Mission to the OSCE**

**23<sup>rd</sup> Economic and Environmental Forum  
‘Water governance in the OSCE area – increasing  
security and stability through co-operation’  
Opening Statement - Concluding Meeting**

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer  
Prague, Czech Republic, September 14, 2015

Good morning, fellow delegates, representatives, and distinguished guests. I would like to thank OSCE Chairperson Foreign Minister Dacic and the Serbian OSCE Chairmanship, Secretary General Zannier, and Dr. Yigitguden, Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, for organizing this week’s concluding meeting of the Economic and Environmental Forum. Thank you to Foreign Minister Burkhalter and the Swiss Foreign Ministry for their leadership in this area. We also thank Deputy Foreign Minister Kulhanek and the Foreign Ministry of the Czech Republic for graciously hosting this Forum. We look forward to the dialogue and recommendations of our esteemed colleagues and experts from academia, NGOs, and international organizations as we consider how the OSCE can contribute to more effective water governance, particularly with regard to cross-border cooperation, and seek to identify steps our countries can take to meet our commitments.

As an organization focused on security, it is important to examine how the OSCE can increase security by preparing for, mitigating, and responding to challenges related to water, whether shortages, floods, or poor quality. We’ve all seen how poor water governance can create instability and increase regional tensions. We’ve seen how water shortages decimate the ability to produce food and energy. We’ve witnessed the devastating impact of extreme weather events and disasters that cost lives, destroy communities, deepen droughts, and affect public health. Despite the significant challenges that water problems create – and in fact, because of those challenges – they also represent opportunities to promote cross-border cooperation, stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship, cooperate to secure access to food and clean water, and address basic humanitarian needs – all of which are critical to security.

Mr. Chairman, the United States is not immune to these challenges. Last month, President Obama and all Americans marked the ten-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, a devastating storm that resulted in the deaths of more than 1,800 people across Louisiana, Mississippi, and the Gulf Coast. From that experience and others, we learned lessons that are relevant to the OSCE’s work to increase security and stability through cooperation and improved water governance. I’d like to highlight three in particular.

First, governments must work together. As President Obama said, although the initial response to Hurricane Katrina was plagued by tragic shortcomings, the recovery has been an example of what’s possible when governments at all levels work together. Hurricane Katrina had devastating effects on the human, environmental, and economic security of millions of Americans. Yet, partnership among different government agencies and jurisdictions that emerged during the recovery led to a model of effective cooperation. At the national level, we developed stricter standards and more advanced techniques for flood

control and invested in the restoration of wetlands and other natural systems. State and local governments in the region worked together to restore communities, provide assistance, and rebuild homes, schools, hospitals, and roads.

Internationally, cooperation on water governance requires similar levels of cooperation and political will. Good water governance is a global challenge, yet many of the solutions are local. In managing our own transboundary relationships and processes, the United States has learned the importance of patience, sustained support, and dedication to achieving results. With Canada, the ground-breaking Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and the Columbia River Treaty have, for more than 40 and 50 years, respectively, provided unique binational coordination and cooperation to facilitate wise shared use of transboundary water. To our South, a water-sharing agreement with Mexico with roots going back to 1848, continues to adapt and improve to meet changing demands. Similarly, across the OSCE, cooperation between participating states, national and local governments, and communities is essential. We look forward to discussions this week to determine how we can all cooperate more effectively and what role the OSCE can play.

Second, we should actively promote economic opportunities to improve water governance through innovation and entrepreneurship. By investing in stronger infrastructure, building better water management systems, retrofitting buildings, improving drainage systems, and developing better computer models, the post-Katrina recovery in the United States has stimulated innovation and entrepreneurship, contributing to economic development and job creation across the region. Across the OSCE, similar opportunities exist. We challenge all delegations and OSCE missions to play an active part in promoting these opportunities.

Third, it is important to recognize that in tandem with climate change, we will continue to see more extreme weather events. Making better use of natural infrastructure, like wetlands and other natural systems, and ensuring that man-made infrastructure can adapt to a wide range of possible conditions, are important steps to respond to variable conditions. We should continue exploring how the OSCE can assist in this effort, which will be the focus of Sessions V and VI this week. And – since much of the impact of climate change will be felt through water -- we look forward to next month’s OSCE Security Days conference on “Climate Change and Security.”

The United States is pleased that transparency and anti-corruption will be discussed in this week’s Forum. Any dialogue on good governance that does not include a frank discussion of these core principles would be incomplete. One of the common characteristics of corruption is that it entails shortcuts on infrastructure and failures to enforce regulations. This multiplies the losses, both human and economic. It also means that corruption in one country poses very real threats to neighboring countries.

Finally, we ask that, in addition to providing a general summary of this week’s Forum, the Coordinator keep track of specific elements that could be part of the practical steps undertaken in the OSCE and by its participating States. Looking forward to next year’s Forum, we call on the Secretariat, the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, and the Conflict Prevention Center to explore the creation of a series of table-top exercises that could examine possible water-related risk scenarios, such as droughts and floods, and identify actions and specific OSCE tools or protocols that could be employed.

In closing, we again thank the Serbian Chairmanship and the OSCE Coordinator for Economic and Environmental Activities for their dedication and commitment to organizing this week's activities. Thank you again to Deputy Foreign Minister Kulhanek and the Foreign Ministry of the Czech Republic for hosting us. This is important work and we look forward to the active participation of all.

Thank you, Mr. Coordinator.