Toespraak van de DG RWS, Martin Wijnen, op de CESNI-bijeenkomst op 29 oktober 2025 in Rotterdam

Ladies and gentlemen,

First, I would like to congratulate you on your anniversary.
It gives me great pleasure to celebrate this milestone with you here in Rotterdam. This is the city where CESNI was founded 10 years ago during a plenary session of the 'Central commission for the Navigation of the Rhine' (CCNR). Moreover, this location is very suitable given the challenge we are facing. Rotterdam is for the shipping industry the gateway to Europe.

I am very pleased that we are using this anniversary as an opportunity to look ahead to the future together, right here in Rotterdam. The world is changing rapidly, bringing both challenges and opportunities. This also applies to the further development of our waterways and related services. That is why I would like to share with you how Rijkswaterstaat is responding to these changes — what we need, what we can learn from one another, and how we can work together. Rijkswaterstaat by the way, was founded not far from here 227 years ago. 227 years… from that perspective, it's always good have some youngsters around.

[Wat is en wat doet RWS] ***[translated: What is Rijkswaterstaat en what does it do?]***
As you undoubtedly know, Rijkswaterstaat manages and develops the Dutch main inland waterway network, which spans more than 3,400 kilometers. This network is indispensable and irreplaceable for our nation. From our seaports, roughly 50% of international freight transport makes its way deep into Europe via rivers and canals.
Rijkswaterstaat faces the same challenge as you do: working towards a European waterway network with safe, accessible, and resilient connections.

We do this by:

- Constructing new waterways and maintaining and developing the current waterways
- Ensuring that shipping traffic runs safely and smoothly
- And by providing waterway users with up-to-date and reliable nautical and traffic information, so that journeys are predictable

But the challenges Rijkswaterstaat faces today are greater, more urgent, and more complex than ever, and Michiel van Kruiningen mentioned that already:

- The weather is becoming increasingly unpredictable, sea levels are rising, and river discharges fluctuate more and more — with more frequent high-water events and longer periods of low water. We have no choice but to make our nation resilient to climate change.
- At the same time, our infrastructure is more vulnerable than ever. Hundreds of bridges, locks, and weirs built in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s are now in urgent need of major renovations.
- In addition, our waterways, assets, and traffic control centres are exposed to increasingly sophisticated threats. Making our infrastructure and systems future-proof requires resilience against sabotage, cyberattacks, and military threats.

[Een uitdagende puzzel] ***[translated: A complex challenge]***
Making our waterways future-proof presents us with a complex challenge. We cannot simply restore our infrastructure to its original state.

We must build with the future in mind:

- Climate-resilient, sustainable, and circular.
- In maintaining and developing our waterways in this delta, we must take into account various interests — including the economy, flood protection, drinking water, agriculture, and nature.

- What makes this task even more challenging is that we must do all this while facing shortages on several fronts: nitrogen allowances, budget, raw materials, and personnel. And last but not least, we face a lack of public support and understanding from increasingly demanding citizens and waterway users.

[Leveren, vereenvoudigen, verbinden] ***[translated: Delivery, simplification, connection]***
All things considered, our nation faces a renovation challenge on the scale of a "Reconstruction 2.0." In the short term, we will need to increase and accelerate our production. How we intend to tackle this major and complex task is set out in my *Intent* — an approach focused on *Delivery, Simplification, and Connections.*

We will steer on '***delivery'***.
By the end of 2030, we aim to quadruple our production for renewing our infrastructure.

In addition, I want to make a strong push on '***simplification'***:
By working more efficiently, uniformly, and in a more standardized way. For example, we have developed production lines to tackle the renovation of locks, bridges, and tunnels in series.

And finally, we are investing in '***connections'***:
- With other government bodies, knowledge institutes, and international partner organizations like yours.
- With construction partners within the industry.
- And with waterway users and citizens living in the areas where we operate.

[Samenwerking] ***[translated: Cooperation]***
Because of the cross-border nature of our waterways, such cooperation is indispensable. Fortunately, we are already giving it very good shape and substance in various ways.
Let me name a few:

1. The *harmonization* of shipping on the Rhine, which the CCR (*Central Commission for Rhine Navigation*) has been working on for more than 200 years, sets useful and clear requirements for the quality of waterway infrastructure and shipping.
2. CESNI's work on uniform standards for the European waterway network supports us in these tasks.
3. Through the TEN-T regulation (Trans-European Transport Network), the EU establishes the framework for the quality of waterway infrastructure across the entire European Union.
4. In the CCR roadmap, we collaborate with other member states on the energy transition for inland shipping, aiming to achieve the European Commission's ambition of reducing CO_2 emissions to zero.
5. Together with the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICBR), we are currently studying how much water will be needed during future drought periods for drinking water, industry, agriculture, and shipping.
6. To manage high river discharges on the Rhine, we cooperate with our partners in North Rhine-Westphalia. And with all our Rhine-bordering states we work together on the Rhine's hydrology within the CHR.
7. For our other cross-border rivers — the Meuse, Ems, and Scheldt — we have cooperation agreements and treaties with our neighboring nations including shipping, water management, and nature conservation.

[Samenwerken aan de toekomst van onze vaarwegen] ***[translated: Working together on the future of our waterways]***
But working on the future of our waterways requires: a boost in cooperation; a boost in our operational effectiveness and impact; and a boost in innovation within our projects. Actually, in line with the words of Fotini Ioannidou.

That is why I would like to share with you a few very specific projects and initiatives through which Rijkswaterstaat aims to prepare its waterways for the future.

[Ruimte voor de rivier 2.0] ***[Room for the river 2.0]***
First, I would like to highlight a project that contributes to making our nation more climate-resilient.
In addition to higher and lower river discharges, riverbed erosion in our rivers the Rhine and Meuse is a major problem. Through the *Room for the River 2.0* program, we work on a new spatial design of the river landscape using an integrated approach. The aim is to increase both flood discharge and water storage capacity.

In addition, we are stabilizing the riverbeds that have been excessively eroded by varying water flows:
- This helps us achieve a better distribution of freshwater across the Netherlands,
- it reduces drought by raising (ground)water levels,
- and has a positive effect on the unique river ecosystem and agriculture.

At the same time, the rivers remain a vital *backbone* for international shipping purposes.

We are aware that with infrastructural measures like these, we will never be able to solve all the challenges of climate change for alle river users. The shipping industry for instance will also increasingly face periods of lower river discharge and has to mitigate that.

[Hinderbeperking] ***[translated: Minimizing disruptions]***
Another topic on which we can learn a great deal from one another is the major maintenance challenge for our waterways. In the coming years, this will increasingly lead to disruptions of shipping traffic. And this is particularly challenging in our nation, where there is little space and few alternative routes to divert traffic. And íf detours are even available, using them requires many extra hours of sailing.

When planning construction projects, we therefore consult well in advance with our stakeholders, such as the inland shipping sector.
This allows us to agree on a well-coordinated schedule that minimizes traffic disruptions and ensures that destinations, both national and international, remain accessible.
For example, during recent works on the Juliana Canal, the only detour route passed Belgium. Arrangements for this detour were made in close coordination between the two nations.

[Verkeersmanagement en informatiediensten] ***[translated: Traffic management and information services***
Traffic management and providing information to waterway users are also important tools to keep traffic running smoothly and are essential during construction works of our infrastructure. More than 5,000 skippers use our electronic information daily for effective trip planning and safe travel.
We continuously improve our services in this regard, for example by further developing the well-known River Information Services (RIS).
Additionally, through **EuRIS**, we provide "wet" traffic information on our waterways, infrastructure closures and disruptions, water levels, and mooring locations. This portal allows skippers to log in once and get access to shipping information from all nations along their route on a single platform.

[Innovaties] ***[translated: Innovation]***
A few words on innovation, to reinforce what Lucia Luijten already shared.
Opportunities for smooth and safe shipping flow can particularly be found in leveraging digitalization, information technology, and artificial intelligence. Smart, semi-autonomous vessels offer the potential to enhance both safety and efficiency on the waterways. The shipping industry in the Netherlands has already taken the first steps towards automated or remotely controlled navigation. And Rijkswaterstaat is closely involved in this process.

In addition, we monitor the developments with track pilots on board of the vessels and conducting trials with the "sharing intentions" between skippers. We recognize that this development needs to be further coordinated with our European waterway authority and the industry. Innovations are progressing rapidly, which makes it essential that we work together to ensure international integration and standardization.

[Internationaal samenwerken] ***[translated: International cooperation]***
Ladies and gentlemen, overall, Rijkswaterstaat is currently focusing on organizing the international cooperation needed to carry out the renovation tasks while simultaneously keeping shipping traffic flowing.

We do this by sharing knowledge on:

- How to incorporate climate adaptation, sustainability, and resilience into our infrastructure.
- Actively involving and leveraging the expertise of the construction industry, knowledge institutions and IT sector.
- Coordinating maintenance and traffic disruptions on the shipping routes to minimize restrictions and prevent economic damage to the transport sector.

But working on the future of our main waterways cannot succeed without awareness at the political level. Real capacity to tackle future challenges requires:

- A shared vision for the development of our rivers in Europe, with carefully considered scenarios to keep river areas robust, resilient, and future-proof.
- The allocation of budgets for targeted investments. Each nation should develop an investment agenda for infrastructure over the next 10 years, and preferably beyond.
- Greater speed, less bureaucracy, and simpler regulations to accelerate the implementation of laws and rules for more and better cross-border cooperation and increased capacity to act.

Raising this awareness therefore presents a major challenge for us in the coming years.

But as I said, above all it requires connection. I am curious to see how CESNI can give an impulse to that cooperation, to the capacity to act, and to the innovation needed to face our future challenges.

I look forward to discussing this with you and I wish you a productive and engaging day.