

“Breaking Ground: the role of geology in the successful delivery of major infrastructure projects”

Speech at opening of conference in Dublin Castle on 11 November 2005 by Mr. Noel Dempsey, TD, Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources. Delivered by Assistant Secretary Michael Guilfoyle

Ireland is fortunate to have a strong and growing economy, one that is seen as a model for other countries. A major influence on the health of our economy is the state of our infrastructure. The government has made a very substantial commitment to national infrastructure through the National Development Plan. As this plan enters its final year, it is timely that all aspects of it should be reviewed and reflected upon. In this context I am very pleased to note the theme which the Institute of Geologists of Ireland has chosen for its annual conference this year. I am aware of the key role that geological services play in our society and particularly in relation to major infrastructure projects.

Geological services help us to understand the physical environment in which major infrastructure is developed. They assist us in overcoming the major challenges posed by ground conditions on projects such as motorways, tunnels, water supplies, wind energy, waste management, aggregate production and offshore construction. By applying the appropriate skills these are major opportunities not only to improve cost efficiencies and minimize frustrating delays, but also to avoid subsequent construction defects and liability claims.

For too long, geological science has been a hidden component of infrastructure and I am pleased to see the Institute has taken the initiative in this important area. Science is a major item for the Governments’ right now as it seeks to implement the EU Lisbon Agenda. This seeks to accelerate economic competitiveness through increased investment in science and technology. The Government is also mindful of the Barcelona Agenda which sets our increased levels of participation in science and technology if Europe is to become truly competitive on a global scale. I recognize geology as a key element in both these agendas.

In recent years the Government provided significant support for geoscience through its’ funding of the Irish National Seabed Survey. Since its inception in 1999, this programme has mapped almost 500,000 sq kilometers of our seabed area and has created an excellent data management system. The programme has stimulated a whole range of value-added and research projects in areas such as fisheries, offshore energy and navigational safety. A follow-up initiative, the INFOMAR programme, has been developed on a joint venture basis between the Geological Survey of Ireland and the Marine Institute and is currently being considered by Government. It seeks to complete the nearshore areas and bays of our coastline and to ensure that maximum benefits are derived for all sectors from this substantial investment. I am aware that a substantial case for the recognition of geoscience in the forthcoming National Development Plan has been prepared by the Geological Survey of Ireland on behalf of the sector. This case addresses issues in the energy, environmental, marine and infrastructure sectors.

The Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI) and the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland have joined together with the Institute in organising this important conference. As the member with responsibility for GSI, I am aware of the range of its activities which support national infrastructure development across the country. Furthermore it has been cooperating effectively with its northern counterpart, the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI), for many years and this will facilitate infrastructure projects on an all-island basis.

The Government welcomes the holding of this important conference at this time. It is an opportunity not only to recognize publicly the substantial contribution that geoscience is making to our national infrastructure but also to review how it can be most effective in the challenges ahead. I congratulate the President of the Institute, Dr. Gareth Jones, and his Council, as well as the two geological surveys, for their foresight in organising this conference. I hope that it will be successful and beneficial for all participants and I am very pleased to officially open it.