

As you are well aware, among many other severe problems, the Turkish invasion and the continuing occupation of more than 37 % of our country's area, has led to the pressing need to substantially raise agricultural production and productivity in the free part of the country. This necessity has, inevitably, caused great strain on our limited land, soil and water resources. The Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources is at a unique position to fully appreciate what this strain involves, as we are, simultaneously, responsible for development and conservation, that is agricultural development, sustainable resource utilization and environmental protection.

Despite our problems, however, we have also fully accepted our international responsibilities. Cyprus is actively involved, in the regional and international activities of the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Council, the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme, to increase food production, conserve our natural resources and maintain and improve our environment.

In this respect, it is important to mention that Cyprus is gradually becoming a center for such international efforts as, among others, due to its geographic position at the crossroads of three continents, the country is ideally placed for regional and international meetings. We also share, with many other countries, the awareness and concern that the growing demands of increasing population within the context of the present world food production and trade system, are accompanied by increasing ecological stress and environmental destruction. Global problems such as soil erosion and degradation, acidification, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, desertification, the transformation of fertile crop land into other uses, the destruction of the world's forests, are advancing at unprecedented rates. These rates, unless reversed, will lead to irreversible and massive disruptions of the global environment and food security. And there can be no justification for the temporary increase in food production if this would lead to the permanent destruction of the resource base upon which agriculture relies.

It is not my intention in this opening address to review the various topics of your Agenda. I am confident that they will be presented and debated in a very comprehensive manner and in an objective and critical spirit. Allow me, however, to stress a topic which is particularly important to Cyprus.

The climatic conditions prevailing in our island and in our region, favour the cultivation of a wide range of crops throughout the year. Water scarcity, however, is a serious constraint which many of our countries encounter and had to learn to live with. In Cyprus, we have made continuous efforts since independence to increase and improve water availability by the building of dams, the replenishment of aquifers, control measures and efficient water use through the introduction of modern irrigation technology and fertigation at the farm level. In addition, we have undertaken a concerted effort, in recent years, on the reuse of properly and safely treated agricultural, municipal and industrial liquid and solid wastes as sources of water and crop nutrients. We attach great importance to this new source of water for irrigation, as we