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COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Ad Hoc Preparatory Working Group of Senior Officials
“Environment for Europe”
(Third session, Geneva, 3-4 July 2002)
(Item 9 of the provisional agenda)

ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING

Note by the secretariat¹

I. Mandate of the Working Group on Environmental Monitoring

1. The Ministers at the Aarhus “Environment for Europe” Conference recognized that mechanisms for coordinated monitoring, data collection, processing and management in the European region were still inadequate. They agreed to give high priority to improving these mechanisms as well as the state of environmental information to support decision-making and to improve the availability of reliable environmental information to the public. The Ministers welcomed the initiative of the Russian Federation to convene a special meeting in Moscow to strengthening the cooperation in this field.

2. In the light of the recommendations of the Moscow (1999) Meeting and a subsequent UNECE preparatory meeting on environmental monitoring, the Committee on Environmental Policy established in 2000 an Ad Hoc Working Group on Environmental Monitoring chaired by the Russian Federation. The Working Group serves as an instrument for UNECE member States to provide recommendations, to propose action plans, and to strengthen international initiatives within the region in the area of environmental monitoring and related areas². The Government of Denmark is currently providing financial support for core Working Group activities.

¹This document was not formally edited.

² See http://www.unece.org/env/europe/environmental_monitoring.htm.

II. Kiev Assessment Report

3. At present, the Working Group focuses on supporting the development by the European Environment Agency (EEA) of the 3rd pan-European assessment report on the environment («Kiev Assessment»). The work on the Kiev Assessment provides an opportunity to improve environmental data collection and reporting in countries in transition, particularly those not covered by EEA networks. It also challenges international organizations working on environmental monitoring and assessment in the UNECE region to better coordinate their activities.

4. The Working Group reviewed the draft list of contents of the Kiev Assessment and made comments and proposals regarding, among other things, topics to be addressed, the time periods to be covered, the level of detail in the assessments, use of existing international databases for data collection, data availability at national level and specific measures to be taken in countries that are not EEA members, the practicalities of making the report user-friendly, and the involvement of NGOs and other major groups in the discussion of the report and dissemination of its findings in UNECE subregions.

5. The discussions led to revisions in the list of contents of the Kiev Assessment. The various aspects of the relationships between environment and human health, which had been originally spread over various chapters, were brought together in a new chapter on environment and health. Adjustments were made in chapters on energy, industry, forestry, transport, climate change, air pollution, waste, and on soil. Arrangements were made to facilitate data collection in countries that are not EEA members (relying, in particular, on upcoming EU/Tacis funding), and to study practicalities of covering North America in the state-of-the-environment reporting to the “Environment for Europe” process.

6. The Working Group reviewed draft guidelines for data collection; questionnaires for country data on soil, waste and water; and a preliminary analysis, in the form of completed indicator data sheets, of the countries that were covered by EEA networks. At its third session on 28-30 August 2002, it will review a preliminary analysis of countries that are not EEA members, a synthesis paper on EEA member countries, some early chapters and the preliminary findings of the Kiev Assessment. Thereafter, at a special session, with the participation of EEA national focal points, on 28-29 November 2002 in Geneva, the Working Group will consider the draft findings, summary and all available chapters of the Kiev Assessment. The report is expected to be published in March 2003.

III. Strengthening national monitoring and reporting

7. The preparation of the Kiev Assessment allowed the Working Group to discuss, at the same time, ways and means to improve environmental monitoring and reporting in selected areas in countries that are not EEA members, and to harmonize these countries methodologies, indicators and practices with those that are applied in EEA members. Actions were taken in the

areas of monitoring of inland waters and air pollution, waste data and classifications, and environmental indicators. Furthermore, the Working Group reviewed the overall situation with environmental monitoring and information systems in several countries that are not EEA members, and provided recommendations to respective Governments.

8. Subject to upcoming EU/Tacis financing, a task force will be established soon under the leadership of the European Topic Centre on Inland Waters (United Kingdom). It will assess information and monitoring systems for inland waters in twelve countries that are not EEA members and make proposals for filling existing gaps in monitoring and information, establishing integrated national data banks for inland waters, and improving cooperation and data exchange between countries covered by EUROWATERNET and those not covered.

9. Having considered the situation with air pollution monitoring in countries that are not EEA members, and the participation of these countries in international monitoring networks, the Working Group invited the Executive Body for the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution to prepare, through its EMEP Steering Body and centres, proposals for a programme, to be implemented jointly with the Working Group, on capacity building for air pollution monitoring in the countries concerned.

10. The Working Group reviewed indicators developed by EEA to help individual countries to monitor progress in waste prevention, waste management and material flows, and to provide comparable information at the pan-European level. It recommended Governments of countries that were not covered by EEA networks to consider using these sets of indicators in their national practices. At its session in August 2002, the Working Group will consider a core set of indicators, derived from the Kiev Assessment, that might be recommended for use in national state-of-the-environment reporting.

11. In February 2002, the Working Group organized a round-table discussion on problems and prospects of environmental monitoring in twelve countries that were not covered by EEA. The debate focused on a draft strategy for updating and developing the State system of pollution monitoring in Georgia, a report on the development of the national environmental monitoring system in Belarus and a review of environmental monitoring activities in Central Asia. The Working Group agreed on a series of recommendations to Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to make monitoring and information systems more efficient, better coordinated with all partners concerned, adaptable to new environmental challenges, and meeting better the requirements of decision makers and the information needs of the general public. In August 2002, the Working Group will review approaches to improving environmental monitoring in the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

IV. Tools and guidelines

12. The Working Group established a task force, with the Russian Federation as lead country, to develop practical tools and instruments, using modern information technologies, to improve the use and exchange of relevant information in twelve countries that were not covered by EEA, and to harmonize these countries' approaches with those applied within EEA networks.

A questionnaire is under completion by task force members on the organization of environmental data flows and on institutions involved in information support for monitoring data in their countries.

13. The Workshop on Information Technologies for Environmental Monitoring and Assessment was held in February 2002 in the Russian Federation to discuss practicalities of establishing Internet-based inter-connected environmental information systems in countries that were not covered by EEA using tools and guidelines applied within the EEA. The Workshop provided practical guidance for the activities of the Task Force on Tools and Guidelines.

14. The Workshop also voiced the need of developing recommendations to Governments (in the form of guidelines) on streamlining and improving state of the environment reporting in the light of new environmental challenges and tasks. Pursuant to this proposal, the preparation of a review has been launched of the current situation with state of the environment reporting in the twelve countries that are not covered by EEA. The discussion of the by Working Group in August 2002 will be followed by the organization of a Workshop in October 2002 to prepare draft guidelines based on best practices in the UNECE region and relevant documents of UNEP, OECD and EEA.

V. Remote sensing

15. Possibilities were discussed for using remote sensing to complement existing ground-based monitoring systems taking into account, in particular, the recent Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) initiative. The Working Group considered a discussion paper by the European Union's Joint Research Centre (EU/JRC) on the role and contribution of remotely sensed information to monitoring and reporting on environmental problems across Europe. At its session in August 2002, the Working Group will discuss Centre's proposals on how remote sensing could contribute (possibly in terms of particular indicators) to pan European state of the environment reporting, in general, and to the Kiev Assessment, in particular.

VI. Coordination of international initiatives

16. The Working Group works in close coordination and cooperation with intergovernmental organizations and institutions and non-governmental organizations that are active in the UNECE region on environmental monitoring and information. It has undertaken the compilation of an inventory of major international environmental databases that are based on data collection from a substantive number of UNECE Governments. This inventory should facilitate the consideration by the Working Group, at its third session in August 2002, of possible measures to improve country coverage in existing environmental databases and to make data contained therein more easily accessible.

VII. Contributions to the Kiev Conference

17. In the light of its above-mentioned activities, the Working Group is expected to provide inputs to the session on “Understanding linkages” of the Kiev Conference, as follows:

- (a) Findings of the Kiev Assessment;
- (b) Conclusions on lessons learned from the preparation of the Kiev Assessment;
- (c) Recommendations to countries that are not EEA members on:
 - (i) Strengthening national environmental monitoring and information systems;
 - (ii) Improving national state-of-the-environment reporting including the use of indicators;
 - (iii) Establishing Internet-based inter-connected environmental information systems using tools and guidelines applied within the EEA;
- (d) Recommendations on improving country coverage in existing environmental databases and making data contained therein more easily accessible.