Chair's conclusions from the Arctic Environment Ministers Meeting

Arctic change – Global effects

Jukkasjärvi, Sweden, 5-6 February, 2013

Arctic Environment Ministers and high level representatives met in Jukkasjärvi, Sweden, 5-6 February, for a meeting focused on actions to address the rapid environmental changes in the Arctic and how to improve the protection of the Arctic environment through actions at the national, regional and global level, including through the Arctic Council and multilateral environmental conventions.

The Arctic region is changing rapidly, in ways that could dramatically affect ecosystems and human communities. Climate change is a major concern and causes fundamental changes in the Arctic, with cascading effects on biodiversity, ecosystems and human living conditions in the Arctic with repercussions around the world. Rapid economic development and social transformation can also have significant impacts. Ministers acknowledged that it is crucial to advance work on assessing Arctic change and improving resilience and to adequately prepare for change in order to minimize negative effects on the environment and on human wellbeing, including traditional lifestyles. They stressed the results from the Arctic Environment Ministers meeting in Ilulissat in 2010 focusing on the Arctic Marine environment and highlighted particularly the importance of careful stewardship and a precautionary approach to resource use and shipping in the Arctic. In this regard they welcomed the progress in the Arctic Council towards improved emergency prevention, preparedness and response, and underlined the need for strengthened preventive measures.

Climate change and ocean acidification

Arctic sea ice extent is rapidly diminishing and saw its lowest extent observed in modern times during 2012. Arctic ice caps are contributing increasingly to the rise of global sea levels. Ministers agreed on the need for decisive national and global mitigation action and confirmed their commitment to work together with other countries to conclude a binding global climate agreement under the UNFCCC no later than 2015 aimed at limiting the increase in global average temperature below 2°C above pre-industrial levels. They underlined that a global increase of 2°C would have major and irreversible impacts on the environment and on the livelihood in the Arctic. Ministers acknowledged the worrying scientific findings identifying large-scale tipping points in the Arctic, such as collapse of the Arctic summer sea-ice, accelerating melting of the Greenland ice sheet, releases of methane from melting permafrost, all of which, if crossed, may have substantial global effects.

Continued Arctic Ocean acidification may lead to severe consequences for marine life and for people dependent on healthy marine ecosystems. Ministers expressed great concern regarding this development, mindful that reductions of carbon dioxide emissions is the only effective way to mitigate ocean acidification, and underlined the need to continue to monitor and assess the development of ocean acidification to understand its full range and effects. Ministers looked forward to the Arctic Ocean Acidification report, and encouraged Arctic States, the Arctic Council, and other relevant organisations and conventions to develop appropriate follow-up actions.

Reducing short lived climate pollutants

Ministers emphasized that substantial cuts in global emissions of carbon dioxide and other long-lived greenhouse gases are the backbone of any meaningful global climate change mitigation efforts, while noting that reducing short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs) such as black carbon, methane, hydrofluorocarbons and tropospheric ozone could slow global and Arctic climate change. Intensified efforts to reduce such emissions at a global scale may reduce the increase in global mean temperature by up to 0.5°C by 2040 according to a recent UNEP report, which would be an important contribution to the achievement of the 2°C objective. Reducing emissions of, for example, black carbon would further provide positive health effects for people in the Arctic States.

Ministers stressed the need for urgent action to reduce SLCP emissions to contribute to Arctic climate change mitigation and to the preservation of the unique culture and ecosystems of the Arctic which are under threat from rapid climate changes. They also underscored the continued role of the Arctic Council and Arctic States in spearheading greater international action on SLCPs and the importance of continuously improving the scientific knowledge of SLCPs and how they impact the climate.

Ministers emphasized the importance of emission inventories for black carbon to identify emission trends and mitigation opportunities. They concurred that each Arctic State should periodically produce national emission inventories for black carbon in line with the guidelines that are to be agreed upon under the Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP). Inventories should be submitted to CLRTAP and shared within the Arctic Council, with the ambition to have submissions starting from February 15 2015.

Ministers concluded that decisive action on black carbon and other SLCPs is needed, and encouraged coordination and support for international and global efforts to address emissions. Ministers encouraged the Arctic Council to consider establishing a process at the Kiruna Ministerial meeting aiming for an instrument or other arrangements to enhance efforts to reduce emissions of black carbon from the Arctic States for review and appropriate decision at the next Ministerial meeting in 2015. Measures to address black carbon (and in some cases other SLCPs) that the Arctic States may wish to consider include: national action plans to be submitted to, and compiled by, the Arctic Council; a common vision for emission reductions; promotion of best mitigation practices and technologies available for relevant pollution sources in the Arctic States and the polar region; promotion of collaborative measures with the private sector; and consideration of benchmarks or targets.

Preventing contamination in the Arctic

The Arctic environment acts as a sink for many global pollutants. Ministers noted with concern projected increases in the level of pollution in the Arctic, including as a result of long-range transport of contaminants and changing climate. Ministers specifically noted the high levels of brominated flame retardants and the already demonstrated adverse effects of exposure to mercury and persistent organic pollutants (POPs) in Arctic territories. Ministers emphasized the importance of effectively implementing existing international instruments to reduce levels of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) and mercury in the Arctic, expressed their continued support of the Arctic States towards those objectives and welcomed the agreement on the Minamata Convention on mercury.

Ministers also recognized the benefits of continued cooperation on policies and mitigation projects to reduce pollution sources within the Arctic States.

Ministers welcomed the work of Arctic States to store obsolete pesticides more safely while aiming at their destruction, and the establishment of the new funding mechanism, the Project Support Instrument, to facilitate further pollution reduction projects. Ministers further underlined the urgency of cleaning up contamination hot spots within Arctic States.

Action to sustain biodiversity and ecosystem services

Ministers emphasized that Arctic biodiversity and ecosystems is an irreplaceable asset of local, national and global importance and that decisive action should be taken to help protect biodiversity and sustain valuable ecosystem services. The sense of urgency is underlined by the expectation that some high Arctic species, ecosystems and habitats could disappear or remain only in isolated fragments. Some migratory birds are rapidly diminishing in numbers and Ministers underlined the need for improved cooperation to identify the driving forces for this development and to identify possible joint action.

The recent Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity resulted in a strong recognition of the importance of Arctic biodiversity and of the Arctic Council work, in particular the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment (ABA). Ministers welcomed the ABA and expected it to provide a much-needed description of the state of biodiversity in the Arctic and to provide science-based suggestions for policy action. Ministers encouraged the Arctic Council to take a leading, coordinating role in the follow–up of ABA and encouraged Arctic States to implement its recommendations. Ministers underlined that strengthened global efforts to reduce climate change, the most serious threat to Arctic biodiversity, are essential and stressed the importance of mainstreaming biodiversity considerations in all relevant policy fields.

Targeted efforts for the conservation and sustainable management of marine, terrestrial and freshwater habitats will be needed, especially in light of the anticipated climate change and economic development. In this context, ministers stressed the importance of implementing agreed biodiversity objectives in the Arctic, including protected areas, in particular the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, and in relation to this encouraged the development of joint work between the Arctic States, building on existing work.

Ecosystem based management

Ministers underlined the importance of implementing an Ecosystem Based Management (EBM) approach in the coastal, marine and terrestrial environments of the Arctic and highlighted the important work by the Arctic Council EBM expert group, in particular proposals for principles to guide further work. They recognized that scientific and traditional knowledge, information gathering and monitoring is at the foundation of EBM and highlighted the need to improve integrated assessments in order to provide a holistic picture of the changes and impacts in the Arctic. They further underlined the importance of rapid identification of biologically, ecologically and culturally sensitive and significant areas and ecosystems within the Arctic States and the Arctic Ocean and that such identification will benefit from the best scientific and traditional knowledge.

They highlighted the importance of joint work, including sharing of information on approaches and experiences with integrated analyses; efforts to consider both traditional and scientific knowledge; and exploring the value of pilot projects between two or more states to demonstrate how EBM could be advanced in the Arctic.

Cooperation to protect the Arctic Environment

Environment ministers have had a long-standing engagement in cooperation on protection of the Arctic Environment dating back to the adoption of the Arctic Environment Protection Strategy in 1991. They have a crucial role for the work of the Arctic Council. Given the continued rapid Arctic change and its local, regional and global effects ministers emphasized the need to further strengthen Arctic cooperation between ministers responsible for environmental protection and to have an open dialogue with all relevant stakeholders.

Recognising their responsibility in implementing internationally agreed decisions, the Environment ministers discussed how they more actively can support decision-making in the Arctic Council and concluded that they wanted to continue to meet again in similar format.

Ministers urged the Swedish chair to convey the chairs conclusions of the Jukkasjärvi meeting at the Arctic Council meeting in Kiruna.

These conclusions were issued by Minister Lena Ek, chair at the Arctic Environment Ministers meeting in Jukkasjärvi, Sweden, 5-6 February 2013.

The meeting was attended by ministers and high level representatives from Canada, Denmark/ The Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Norway, The Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States of America. They were joined by Arctic Council Permanent Participants representing the Sami Council and the Inuit Circumpolar Council, as well as other interested countries and organisations.