

**Fifth Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe"
Kiev, Ukraine, 21-23 May 2003**

Item 6: Extraordinary meeting of the Parties to the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters

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Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

On the occasion of opening the Protocol on PRTR for signature, the REC would like to congratulate the governments, international organisations, ECOForum and other NGOs who participated in the two years of intensive work in the UNECE Working Group on PRTRs.

This new legal instrument is an important step forward for most European countries. Although not as far-reaching as originally envisaged, it includes many essential elements of a "traditional" PRTR. It also brings together disparate approaches into a concentrated international effort. However, the Protocol has left a few issues unresolved, on which agreement was not possible at this stage. We hope that the Signatories will continue to work on these issues, including efforts to ensure convergence of the various approaches to PRTR systems.

Countries planning to implement the Protocol have a wealth of international experience to draw from. In the more than 10 years since the Rio Conference, the experience of the US TRI system and similar initiatives in Canada, Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and other countries have produced significant results. International organisations, such as the OECD, UNITAR and UNEP took on successful capacity-building programmes.

Several EU accession countries, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland, expressed substantial interest in establishing a PRTR in the second half of the 1990s. However, progress in these countries slowed as EU-harmonisation efforts demanded increasing attention. The new Protocol helps to bridge the gaps between earlier PRTR initiatives and the EU's EPER system. Experience shows that national PRTR systems can co-exist with EU harmonisation efforts without compromising the PRTR agenda. For example, the two-track approach in the Protocol to reporting on emissions into land allows countries to take advantage of the most useful and efficient features of both systems thus enabling the public wider access to information.

In the Central and Eastern European countries many institutions have developed not only their own systems of registers, but also their own methodologies for analysing and processing data. This has led to multiple, incompatible and inconsistent registers run by various institutions, often without coordination, even within the agencies themselves. The lack of a single integrated system for accessing information on emissions from concrete facilities, in all environmental media, and on the most significant substances creates a serious obstacle not only for public access to information, but also for the effective use of such information by the public, governments and businesses.

It is important that countries show their commitment to and support for the Protocol by signing it during the Conference, or by the end of 2003 at the latest. The Protocol, however, provides only a minimum ground for the development of PRTRs. Each country can and should go beyond the Protocol's minimum requirements and develop a system that reflects its own needs and conditions, drawing from the best features of the existing systems.

Further cooperative efforts are needed to promote the exchange of experience, capacity-building and technical assistance needed at the national level to implement the Protocol successfully. Projects supporting capacity-building, awareness-raising, information dissemination and comprehensive stakeholder dialogue about the Protocol's implementation, along with pilot projects to discuss the strategies and practical issues leading to the establishment and efficient operation of PRTRs, will give the countries of Central and Eastern Europe a helpful boost in setting up these important instruments. The REC looks forward to providing continued assistance in these areas.

Thank you.