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EU determines 'Arctic footprint'

EU steps up efforts to identify Arctic pressures

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM – The EU has taken a first step towards reducing its environmental impacts on the Arctic region by investigating EU-driven pressures on the Arctic. Vice President of the European Parliament, Diana Wallis, Iceland's Senior Arctic Official, Greta Gunnarsdottir and Nicholas Hanley, Head of the International Relations and Enlargement Unit for DG Environment welcomed over 60 experts from government and civil society in Brussels today to discuss the implications of a new report, the EU Arctic Footprint and Policy Assessment, which shows that the EU is already addressing many Arctic environmental challenges, but that certain new and growing impacts must be addressed, both through EU and multilateral efforts.

Climate change is predicted to bring significant changes in the Arctic, potentially creating new opportunities in the fisheries, shipping, tourism and energy sectors. However, threats to biodiversity and local communities are also likely to increase due to warming and increasing levels of pollutants in the Arctic, such as black carbon, mercury and POPs. New economic development could also present environmental challenges, including oil spills and habitat loss.



During the conference, representatives of the EU, Member States, and Arctic countries as well as members of the scientific community considered the EU's potential role in assisting adaptation in the Arctic. Many stressed the need for facilitating a controlled transition to a new Arctic paradigm.

"The EU is an important stakeholder in managing the growing pressures in the Arctic. As a major importer of Arctic goods and a significant contributor to Arctic pollution, the EU has a critical contribution to make as Arctic states and neighbouring countries deal with both the costs and potential economic

benefits as a result of climate change," said Hanley.

The EU Arctic Footprint and Policy Assessment identifies a range of policy pathways, including stronger EU environmental laws, increased cooperation through multilateral agreements and international leadership, through which the EU can assist in managing Arctic pressures. The report also used a novel method for calculating one region's environmental footprint on another, devising a scorecard which shows how much the EU contributes to various Arctic pressures, such as transboundary pollution, tourism, demand for oil and gas, and fish imports. The report describes both market-based instruments and regulatory options for reducing many of the potential impacts from these economic sectors.



Representatives of the Arctic Council indicated that the EU is encouraged to reduce EU-driven impacts, and that this can be a tool for more cooperative action between the EU and Arctic states. Nikolaj Bock from the European Environment Agency stated, “Arctic States and EU Member States can and should work more closely together to address transboundary environmental challenges. There are several areas where information sharing and coordination of related programs could be enhanced, and the European Environment Agency greatly supports the efforts of establishing a Sustained Arctic Observing Network and have much knowledge and experience to share from the European Environment Information and Observation Network in which five of the Arctic states already cooperate on common environmental challenges. Improved coordination on collection, dissemination and use of data and information will better guide decision makers through assessments and outlooks on the Arctic environment.”



EU representatives also encourage greater cooperation, including through harmonising Arctic guidelines for shipping and oil extraction to ensure that safety and environmental protection are prioritised even as new opportunities in these industries arise. “Binding international rules are necessary to ensure that what happened in the Gulf of Mexico this summer does not happen in the Arctic, where mitigation would likely be much more difficult and clean-up costs higher,” emphasised Vice President of the European Parliament, Diana Wallis.



The EU Arctic Footprint and Policy Assessment is another step towards a comprehensive EU policy strategy for addressing challenges in the Arctic. In 2009, the EU Council adopted the “Council conclusions on Arctic issues”, emphasising the need for gradual formulation of a policy on Arctic issues to address EU interests and responsibilities in the region. According to the Council, the EU policy on Arctic issues should: effectively mitigate climate change to preserve the unique characteristics of the Arctic region; reinforce multilateral governance through effective implementation of international, regional, bi-lateral agreements, frameworks and arrangements; enhance measures of international conventions, such as UNCLOS and other relevant international instruments; formulate and implement EU actions and policy, taking into consideration the sensitivities of ecosystems as well as the needs and rights of Arctic residents; and maintain the Arctic as an area of peace and stability and highlight the need for responsible, sustainable and cautious actions, particularly in the area of resource extraction.



This conference is the final event of the “EU Arctic Footprint and Policy Assessment” project, which was funded by the European Commission’s Directorate General Environment in order to continue the process of indentifying EU policy strategies for reducing pressures on the Arctic and preparing for new opportunities and challenges. More information on the project as well as project reports are available online at <http://arctic-footprint.eu/>.

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