

CSD 14 REGIONAL DISCUSSIONS – EUROPE: Presentation by Martin Williams, Chairman of the Executive Body, UNECE Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP)

“A model for reducing transboundary air pollution” (E/CN.17/2006/3, Box 8)

The Economic Commission for Europe's regional Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution has tackled the problem of acidification in Europe with success. The original 34 countries that signed the Convention, which entered into force in 1983, have been joined by 16 others, bringing the current participants to 50. The Convention has developed an innovative approach that relies on scientific expertise and using the science to aid decision making. Besides establishing the general principles of international cooperation for air pollution abatement, it set up an institutional framework for bringing together research and policy formulation. Sulphur emissions have been cut by about 60 per cent since 1980 and, to a lesser extent, emissions of NO_x and volatile organic compounds have decreased. As a result, acidification of the soils and waters in Europe and North America, the problem that prompted countries to sign the Convention, is now declining.

To achieve its goals the Convention has adopted 8 Protocols all of which are now in force. This address different air pollution and set goals for their control. Since the Protocols are all now in force there is much emphasis on implementing the Protocols and achieving their objectives. The three most recent Protocols have been, or are being review, and consideration is being given to possible updates and amendments.

The UNECE region is very varied and the capacity for some countries to develop abatement measures is much less than others. For this reason Parties are placing special emphasis on assistance to Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia and to South East Europe where a number of countries with economies in transition are working to accede to the Convention's Protocols.

Challenges for the future

Despite its successes, the Parties to the Convention still have major challenges for the future:

Nitrogen emissions are only falling slowly and those of ammonia are proving very difficult to control. Effects of nitrogen on natural systems are becoming widespread and there is worldwide concern of the need to address the problem.

International shipping emissions of sulphur and nitrogen oxides are poorly controlled and show little sign of decrease. They are becoming an increasing proportion of the total emissions and an increasing concern to the Convention Parties.

Fine particulate matter has long been recognized as a health hazard, but recent work by WHO and the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) has shown the scale of the problem. Populations throughout Europe are, on average, losing many life months due to the pollution. Vulnerable groups may lose many more months of life.

Ground-level ozone effects on plants and human health were addressed through the Convention's 1999 Protocol. However, high levels of ozone persist and Convention scientists have not been able to show any improvement across Europe.

Intercontinental movement of pollutants, especially of ozone and particulate matter, is providing a new focus for Convention work. Global scale models show that significant amounts of pollution can move around the northern hemisphere in particular. This complicates the regional control of pollution; benefits expected from regional action may not occur.

Links with greenhouse gas emissions has attracted the attention of the Convention's Parties. Work has shown that a coordinated approach to dealing with air pollution and emissions of greenhouse gases (often from the same sources and in some instances the same gases) can result in major savings helping to achieve goals for both problems.

Taking all of the challenges into account is a complex problem with many interlinked policy issues.

The scientific problems are difficult and the policy solutions will not be easy but already the technical experts under the Convention are gathering the data and building the models to explore the available options. The results may have wider implications than any work done by the Convention so far. We in the Convention look forward to extending our co-operative activities with other regions across the world as we move forward on these important problems.