

BEAC Working Group on Environment. Activity report 2015-2017.

The Chairmanship of the BEAC Working Group on Environment (WGE), was transferred from Russia to Norway at the 12th Meeting of the Ministers of Environment in Sortavala, in November 2015. During the Norwegian chairmanship, the Subgroups on Hot Spots Exclusion, Nature Protection and Water Issues have continued their work. Climate change and sustainability issues have been handled directly by the WGE.

The WGE have had four meetings during the Norwegian chairmanship. The meetings were held back-to-back with meetings in the WGE Subgroups, with a total of up to 40 participants. In addition, the Subgroups and projects under the WGE have organized own separate meetings.

Climate change

Climate change has been an overarching priority for the WGE during the period. During the period, the *Action Plan on Climate Change for the Barents Cooperation* from 2013 has been updated. The updated Action Plan contains projects up to 2020 from the Working Group on Environment, Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, Joint Working Group on Education and Research, Joint Committee on Rescue Cooperation in the Barents Region, Barents Regional Youth Council, Barents Forest Sector Network and Regional Working Group on Transport and Logistics. The renewed Action Plan will be sent to the BEAC CSO for consideration before the meeting in BEAC 19th October in Arkhangelsk, and suggested for adoption by the Ministers of Environment in November 2017.

WGE would like to thank the working groups that have contributed to the renewed Action Plan. The WGE further stresses that climate change will affect most sectors represented in the Barents cooperation and urges other working groups to engage in concrete climate action.

In order to envision possible implications for the Barents Region of the Paris Agreement, WGE has commissioned a study called "*Barents 2050 – Opportunities for contributing to climate change mitigation*". The goal of the study is to assess how low emission pathways, consistent with the Paris Agreement, could affect economic activities in the Barents region. Furthermore, to assess how the region could contribute to the achievement of the Paris goals and build resilience – both to the effects of climate change and to the effects of mitigation actions. The VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland is conducting the study, which will be presented to the Ministers of Environment in Vadsø 30. November.

Development of Regional Climate and Energy Strategies, is led by Norrbotten, Sweden. Since 2015 there has been an active collaboration, between Norrbotten, Arctic Centre in Rovaniemi and the Archangelsk region, aiming at developing region-specific climate and energy strategies that can support and enhance the speed of the transition to a low-carbon society. So far, the focus has been on exchanges of experiences both at WGE meetings, through a conference in Archangelsk in Mars and through a study visit in Norrbotten in May 2017. An application for a three-year project to the first Kolarctic CBC call of 2018 has been prepared.

Subgroup on Hot Spots Exclusion (SHE)

In Sortavala in 2015, three hot spots were excluded from the hot spots list. The Work on Barents Hot Spots during the Norwegian chairmanship has been targeted to *further exclusion of Hot Spots* from the list. The Subgroup on Hot Spots Exclusion (SHE) has during the period continued this process, according to the procedure and criteria for the exclusion of hot spots from 2010. A decision on which new hot spots can be excluded from the list, will be taken in connection with the meeting of the Barents environmental ministers, 29.-30. November 2017.

SHE has also worked to develop *Specific Exclusion Criteria* for some hot spots. These criteria will form the basis for the future exclusion of these hot spots, and serve as pilots for development of specific exclusion criteria for the remaining hot spots on the list.

SHE has during the period focused on the development of support activities for the exclusion of hot spots. The focus is on capacity building for hot spots owners and regional environmental authorities on the new Russian legislation on best available techniques (BAT) that will enter into force in 2019. SHE has both participated in and organized own events to support the further exclusion of hot spots, and more activities are planned. One example of the support activities was participation of SHE at a seminar in Arkhangelsk on the introduction of integrated environmental permitting based on BAT in the Pulp and Paper Mill industry in Russia in September 2016, organized by the Russian BAT bureau and Arkhangelsk Pulp and Paper Mill.

SHE works closely with regional Hot Spots Exclusion Groups, the Nordic Environment Finance Cooperation (NEFCO) and the International Barents Secretariat. NEFCO's Barents Hot Spots Facility is a useful tool for financing activities in the subgroup and to facilitate the implementation of concrete measures in the Barents environmental "hot spots".

Nature Protection Subgroup and Subgroup on Water Issues

During the Norwegian chairmanship, the Nature Protection Subgroup (NPS) and Subgroup on Water Issues (SWI) have met jointly under the heading *Nature and Waters*. The main goals of the two subgroups are to strengthen the regional cooperation on mitigation and adaptation to climate change and to protect the ecosystems of the Barents region and the services they provide. Exchange of information and enlightening the inhabitants in the Barents region about the natural resources of the region and the increasing pressure on them, is another high priority. Examples of projects that have been carried out in the period 2015-2017, are:

The 9th Habitat Contact Forum (HCF) was arranged 6.-9. June 2017 in Oulu, Finland. The main themes of the 9th HCF was climate change and biodiversity, forest protection, ecosystem services, wetlands and connectivity.

The Barents Protected Area Network (BPAN), has continued with its second phase, focusing on marine and coastal cooperation and forest protection. BPAN II has produced updated facts and figures about the progress towards fulfilling the Aichi Biodiversity Targets of the UN Convention on Biodiversity. More information: www.bpan.fi.

Within *the Green Belt of Fennoscandia* several events were organized as a part of the implementation of the strategy for this cooperation, for instance the 9th Pan European Greenbelt meeting in Koli, Finland autumn 2016.

A seminar on local and traditional ecological knowledge and cross-border cooperation was arranged, in May 2017 in Bugøynes Norway.

The Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) project “Monitoring mercury (Hg) in the border areas of Norway, Russia and Finland 2015-2017” was carried out. Monitoring results show that mercury levels are rising in the northern cross-border areas.

Development of project applications to cross-border cooperation financial instruments within the EU, Nordic Council of Ministers and North Calotte Programmes. Developing applications for these financial instruments is a resource demanding task, but once approved for funding, these instruments provide valuable and joint financial contributions to the activities in the subgroups for nature and waters. Five new project applications were accepted for funding in this period:

- "Tana River Interreg North – Joint environmental management of the River Tana",
- “SEAmBOTH Interreg North” - seamless mapping and management of the northern Bothnian Bay.
- “Cross-border dialogue and Multiuse planning in the Pasvik and Grense Jakobselv river catchments”
- SALMUS - Salmonid Fish and Freshwater Pearl Mussel – Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity in the Green Belt of Fennoscandia”
- “ReArc -Ecological Restorations of Arctic Rivers”.

A priority of the Norwegian chairmanship has been to strive for the implementation of the *Strategy for protection of intact forests in the Barents region*, which the Ministers asked for in their meeting in Inari, Finland in 2013. The strategy was presented to the Ministerial meeting in Sortavala in 2015, but not adopted by the ministers. The Ministers, however, acknowledged the Strategy as an important contribution to preserve the Region's last pristine forests, and to meet the Aichi biodiversity targets of the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD). The strategy has been under consideration by the Russian Forestry Agency, which in September 2017 forwarded a series of questions and comments to the strategy. Based on this input, the WGE has decided that it will be necessary to rewrite the strategy or to write a new strategy. Further work with the Forest strategy will be followed up by the forthcoming Swedish chairmanship of the WGE in close cooperation with the relevant Russian authorities. In the 2016-2017 period, the issue of forest conservation has been followed up in the BPAN Phase II project.

Cooperation with other working groups and regional organizations

The WGE puts emphasis on good cooperation with other relevant foras in the Barents Cooperation and with other regional organizations in the north. Cooperation between the WGE and the Regional Working Group on Environment (RWGE) was promoted by inviting

the Regional Working Group on Environment to all WGE-meetings. In practice, RWGE members met as a part of the meetings in the Subgroups on Nature and Water and in the WGE-meetings. Indigenous Peoples' representatives take an active part in the WGE meetings and provide input to the work.

The WGE seeks close cooperation with other working groups in the Barents cooperation as well as other regional organizations in the north. Presentations from the Arctic were included in the WGE-meetings. In June 2016 WGE chair presented WGE's work in Brussels at the event "Talking Barents", organized by the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, The Russian chairmanship of the Barents Euro Arctic Region, North Norway European Office, Mission of Norway to EU. The WGE chair participated in an Information event, organized by the International Barents Secretariat on behalf of the Russian chairmanship in BEAC and the Kainuu chairmanship of the Barents Regional Council in Moscow, April 2017.

WGE has participated in two conferences on forestry and climate change, organised by the Barents Forest Sector Network – The Barents Forest Sector Network Meeting/Innovation and Technology in Forestry in June 2016 in St. Petersburg and the *Barents Forest Forum*, in September 2017 in Arkhangelsk.