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Session IV — Environmental security and sustainable economic development

Experiences in countering land degradation and soil contamination in the Russian Federation

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Russian delegation to the 15th Meeting of the OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum, permit me to welcome you and to draw your attention to current problems in combating land degradation and soil contamination in the Russian Federation.

1. The structure of Russia's land resources

The total area of the Russian Federation is 1,709.1 million hectares, or 17.1 million square kilometres. Russia's land resources are broken down as follows:

Type of land	Area	
	millions of hectares	% of total area
Agricultural land	222.0	13.0
Forests and shrubland	787.0	46.0
Wetlands	109.3	6.4
Under water	71.3	4.2
Reindeer grazing land	319.0	18.7
Land occupied by buildings and structures	5.2	0.3
Roads, livestock paths	8.2	0.5
Disturbed land and land undergoing rehabilitation	2.0	0.1
Shifting sand dunes, gullies, landslides, scree, glaciers	185.1	10.8
Total	1,709.1	100.0

Agricultural land, which accounts for just 13 per cent of our country's land resources, is currently shrinking.

Over the past 25 years the area of agricultural land has declined by 33 million hectares, in spite of the fact that new land is being developed for agricultural purposes every year.

The main reasons for the decline in the area of agricultural land are soil erosion, the ill-considered conversion of land to non-agricultural uses, waterlogging, swamping and the encroachment of forests and shrubs.

2. Current problems in land degradation and soil contamination

2.1 Desertification

A decline in or loss of the biological potential of land, driven by a whole range of natural and man-made factors, is leading to the emergence of desert-like conditions.

This problem is particularly acute in the Black Soils State Nature Reserve (in the Republic of Kalmykia), which was established in 1990 with a view to counteracting man-made desertification. The black soils of the Caspian region were once known for their abundantly rich grasslands suitable for grazing, which spread out over hundreds of thousands of hectares, but much of this land has now turned into a semi-arid region and the channel of the Volga-Chargai canal, a grandiose construction project that was not completed, offers a tableau of a disheartening ecological disaster.

The main causes of the desertification were an increase in the area of shifting sand dunes, a decline in the productivity of pasturelands and the exhaustion of local water supply sources.

During the period of maximum desertification (1985), the ecological disaster in the Black Soils region covered an area of 3,760 square kilometres, and the area surrounding it took in 8,130 square kilometres.

These areas have now declined, to 2,780 square kilometres and 6,900 square kilometres, respectively, which is evidence that the environmental degradation processes have stabilized over recent decades.

These positive trends can be explained by the development of phytomelioration, a decline in the illegal use of pasturelands and a suspension of the construction of unauthorized hydraulic engineering installations. A large portion of the Black Soils area still remains in a compromised state today, however.

A rise in the frequency of droughts and the resulting increase in crop failures, the dying off of vegetation and the damage to soils over significant areas are all interconnected, they are driven by the overall trend towards the aridization* of land and are aggravated by the negative consequences of ill-advised human activities.

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* Aridization is a diverse set of processes that involve a decline in moisture levels in certain areas and a resulting reduction in the biological productivity of ecosystems. This occurs both as a result of natural factors (cyclical climate changes) and man-made factors (the extraction of groundwater, erosion, dust storms). The result is desertification and the increasing aridity of desert regions.

2.2 Land degradation

Land degradation is one of the most critical environmental problems in Russia.

The damming of rivers resulted in the flooding of land covering an area of more than 30 million hectares and this figure is moving steadily upward.

A rise in the level of the Caspian Sea resulted in the flooding and waterlogging of 560,000 hectares of agricultural land.

Elevated soil acidity has been reported on agricultural land covering an area of 48.7 million hectares, with land under cultivation accounting for 37.1 million hectares of this figure.

The processes described above involving soil degradation, disturbance and destruction are continuing in drought-affected areas in the south-eastern sector of the European part of Russia.

Irreversible land degradation in the tundra and forest-tundra regions is occurring as a result of the disturbance of topsoil from the development of mineral deposits, vehicle traffic, grazing and geological prospecting work.

2.3 Soil contamination

Growing contamination of land as a result of the unauthorized dumping of industrial, household, agricultural and other manufacturing and consumer waste products is a dangerous trend.

The land around many industrial enterprises is contaminated by toxic substances. Russia today has more than 730,000 hectares with an extremely hazardous level of soil contamination.

Large non-ferrous metallurgy plants are among the most serious sources of topsoil contamination.

High levels of heavy metals and other hazardous materials are found in the land adjacent to these plants, which can be explained by the fact that open-pit mining is the predominant method used to extract raw materials.

The heavy metal content found in the topsoil in dozens of towns near metallurgical plants is above the maximum permissible levels.

The town of Rudnaya Pristan (in Primorye Kray), the site of a lead smelter, has the highest level of soil contamination in Russia. The lead content in the soil in this region is on average 300 times higher than the maximum permissible levels.

The level of lead in the topsoil in Belovo (Kemerovo Oblast) is 50 times higher than the maximum permissible levels, and in Revda (Sverdlovsk Oblast) it is five times higher.

The levels of lead, cadmium, manganese, copper, chromium and mercury present in the soil in towns in Moscow Oblast, in the cities of Novosibirsk and Tomsk and in Sverdlovsk and Irkutsk oblasts is many times (tens of times) higher than the maximum permissible levels.

The contamination of soil by oil and petroleum products in areas where they are extracted, refined, transported and distributed is tens of times higher than the maximum permissible levels.

The maximum content of oil in the soil in Ivanovo and Tomsk is between 9 and 56 times higher than the baseline level, and it is an average of 4–7 times higher.

A high level of soil contamination is found on the grounds of the Volgograd oil refinery and within a radius of 250 metres around the facility. Contamination by petroleum products has been identified within a 1 km radius of the Novokuibyshevsk oil refinery and petroleum products have permeated the soil to a depth of 0.5 metre.

The infiltration of oil and petroleum products has led to the formation of large underground deposits in Angarsk, Mozdok, Tuapse, Yeisk, Orel, Novokuibyshevsk, Ufa, Komsomolsk-on-Amur and other towns.

We are all well aware of the ecological disaster that occurred in the Komi Republic in 1994, which entered the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the largest known case of soil contamination in the world.

A total of 23 ruptures were found in the Vozei-Headworks oil pipeline on 12 August 1994. As a result of the accident, which took more than a month to clean up, a total of 115.8 hectares of land was contaminated along the pipeline that connects a number of oilfields, and 164.6 hectares was disturbed. According to official statistics, a total of 14,000 tons of oil was spilled. Although according to expert estimates, the actual amount of oil spilled could have been more than 100,000 tons. A significant amount of the oil ended up in the Kolva and Usa rivers, which have valuable fish stocks.

The scale of the accident and the difficulty of dealing with the environmental consequences were the reason for an emergency loan in the amount of US$124 million from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which has a representative here today.

I should mention that in the process of dealing with the environmental consequences of the Vozei disaster, Russia gained valuable experience in the reclamation of soil that has been contaminated by oil. Test plots located right in the disaster zone have served as a site for trying out the latest technologies and have been the focus of international scientific co-operation and the sharing of experience.

The data cited above are evidence of the difficult legacy that Russia has inherited today from previous generations who paid little attention to protecting the environment and making sustainable use of natural resources.

Russia's current laws and actions by the Government are aimed at ensuring environmental security in the implementation of production projects, including those involving the utilization of our country's natural resources.

3. The current system of environmental protection agencies in the Russian Federation that are involved in counteracting land degradation and soil contamination processes

The Federal Service for the Oversight of Natural Resources (Rosprirodnadzor) was established in November 2006 as a specially authorized federal government agency responsible for State land control, which in turn is carried out with a view to ensuring compliance by organizations, regardless of their organizational and legal form and form of ownership, and by individuals with land legislation and the requirements for land conservation and land use.

Rosprirodnadzor monitors the following:

(a) Fulfilment of land rehabilitation obligations after the completion of mining operations (including operations involving commonly occurring minerals), construction, drainage and irrigation, logging, prospecting and other work, including on-farm work or work performed for a company's own needs;

(b) Compliance with land improvement and soil conservation requirements and mandatory measures to provide protection against wind and water erosion and to prevent other processes that have an adverse effect on land quality;

(c) Observance of the requirements of Russian legislation prohibiting the clear-cutting of forest tracts and the use of forest resources and land for manufacturing, the placement of storage facilities, the erection of structures (building activity), cultivation and other purposes without special permits for the use of these tracts;

(d) The utilization of land and forest resources in water conservation zones and along shorelines;

(e) Compliance with other requirements of the land legislation related to land use and conservation within the scope of its authority.

At the same time, the State land control system also includes the Federal Agency for the Registration of Real Property (Rosnedvizhimost) and the Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Oversight (Rosselkhoznadzor).

In addition to the supervisory bodies, prosecutor's offices and the courts also perform law enforcement functions.

Thus, the Russian Federation is making significant progress towards building an effective Government control system to oversee the use of natural resources and environmental protection, which is aimed at ensuring the rational use of natural resources and sustainable development.

4. International investment projects and environmental security

Russia's special position in global economic processes dictates the need for vigorous work aimed at resolving environmental problems that accompany the implementation of large-scale (transnational) business projects.

In this connection, as was already mentioned, we welcome the efforts by the OSCE aimed at the development of international business communities that understand the principles of sustainable development and rational use of natural resources.

Rigorous compliance with conservation requirements throughout the world is an essential condition for the success of any business.

The opportunities that Russia offers at this particular moment are truly unique. Our country is an open playing field for the implementation of major transnational investment projects.

This does not mean, however, that these projects can be carried out while ignoring the requirements of the environmental protection legislation, which is how things were done up until recently.

The Russian authorities, including the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Office of the Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation, are paying very close attention to compliance with environmental protection legislation by companies engaged in the extraction, transport and processing of hydrocarbon and other raw materials on the territory of the Russian Federation.

With a view to averting detrimental environmental consequences and ensuring mutually beneficial co-operation in the future, we invite all interested parties to play an active role in the determination and application of environmental protection requirements that precede the implementation of any investment projects and that are carried out following the procedure established by law.

We also believe that a series of conferences, with the participation of representatives of the Russian authorities, public conservation organizations and business, including transnational companies, devoted to ensuring environmental security in the implementation of investment projects, would do a great deal to promote progress in this sphere.

Thank you for your attention.