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Twenty-sixth Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) of NEASPEC

23-24 November 2023

Seoul, Republic of Korea

**REPORT OF THE TWENTY-SIXTH SENIOR OFFICIALS MEETING
OF THE NORTH-EAST ASIAN SUBREGIONAL PROGRAMME FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION**

1. The Twenty-sixth Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) was held in Seoul on 23-24 November 2023 and hosted by the Republic of Korea. The Meeting was organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Subregional Office for East and North-East Asia, serving as NEASPEC Secretariat, and was chaired by the Government of the Republic of Korea.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2. The Meeting commended the contribution of NEASPEC to promote subregional environmental cooperation. The Meeting reaffirmed the commitments of the member States to enhancing national actions towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, strengthening subregional approach to environmental cooperation, and creating synergies among multi-stakeholders and relevant mechanisms to expedite actions on subregional and global environmental challenges.

3. The Meeting adopted the **Commemorative Statement on Promoting Environmental Cooperation in North-East Asia** on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of NEASPEC.

4. **Air Pollution:** The Meeting noted the work progress in 2022 and 2023 on air pollution in line with the North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (NEACAP) Work Plan 2021-2025. The Meeting noted the report of the 5th meeting of the NEACAP Science and Policy Committee (SPC) held on 8 September 2023 in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The Meeting was informed of the progress made on the policy analysis report and the review paper on the Best Available Techniques (BAT).

5. The Meeting commended the progress made under the Category I activities and advised that the final report should be adopted at the SOM-27. The Meeting requested the Secretariat to have consultations with the member States on the comments to the BAT review paper. The Meeting further advised that the Secretariat provide a detailed concept note for the 2nd Policy Dialogue for the consideration of the member States to decide on the necessity of holding the dialogue or the possibility of holding it in conjunction with the SOM-27. In developing the next NEACAP Work Plan, the Meeting also noted the clear roles of the Technical Centres (TC) should be mentioned in the work plan. The Meeting further noted capacity building is a continuing process covering all activities under the work plan.

6. The Meeting commended the holding of the first *Symposium on Air Pollutant Emissions Inventory and Air Quality Management* on 7 September 2023 in Seoul, Republic of Korea, in collaboration with the National Air Emission Inventory and Research Center (NAIR) and requested to hold the NEACAP Symposium annually. The Meeting adopted the proposed activity plan for the remaining 2023 and 2024.

7. **Biodiversity and Nature Conservation:** The Meeting was informed of the outcomes of the NEASPEC projects on the *Transboundary Cooperation on the Conservation of Amur tiger, Amur leopard and Snow leopard in North-East Asia*, and *Transboundary Cooperation among Protected Wetlands in the Lower Tumen River Area*. The Meeting noted the progress of the project on the evaluation of the *Current Status of the Transboundary Snow Leopard Subpopulation in the Border Area between Mongolia and the Russian Federation*. The Meeting also took note that the funding for the project proposal on *the connectivity conservation for habitats of flagship migratory birds in North-East Asia* is in consideration of the Russian Federation.

8. The Meeting commended the progress made on transboundary cooperation for the NEASPEC flagship species and their habitats and highlighted the need to strengthen the linkages from local to regional and global strategies and action plans in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). The Meeting requested the Secretariat to prepare a concept note on the development of a knowledge-sharing platform on cross-border biodiversity conservation including its budget implications. The Meeting welcomed the offer by the Republic of Korea to host a workshop on nature conservation and biodiversity for transboundary cooperation in the first half of 2024. The Meeting adopted the proposed activity plan for the remaining 2023 and 2024.

9. **Marine Protected Areas:** The Meeting took note of the progress in 2022 and 2023 on marine protected areas and recognized it as a successful work of NEASPEC. The Meeting supported the planned studies on *Ocean-based Climate Actions of the North-East Asia Marine Protected Areas Network (NEAMPAN)* for China and the Republic of Korea. The Meeting noted the expansion plan of NEAMPAN and reaffirmed the step-by-step approach of the NEAMPAN site expansion and activities. The Meeting welcomed the offer by China to host a NEAMPAN workshop in 2024. The Meeting adopted the proposed activity plan for the remaining 2023 and 2024.

10. **Low Carbon Cities:** The Meeting was informed of the progress made in the North-East Asia Low Carbon City Platform (NEA-LCCP), highlighting the significant roles of cities in tackling climate

change. The Meeting commended the successful organization of the international forums on low-carbon cities since 2021 in promoting information sharing and peer learning of cities in North-East Asia and beyond. The Meeting welcomed the strong interests of the member States in hosting the international forums on low-carbon cities in 2024 and the coming years. The Meeting also requested the Secretariat to coordinate the schedule of the international forum in consideration of major international conferences planned in 2024. The Meeting adopted the proposed activity plan for the remaining 2023 and 2024.

11. **Desertification and Land Degradation:** The Meeting noted the progress made in re-orienting the work programme on desertification and land degradation (DLD), avoiding duplications and creating synergies with other subregional platforms. The Meeting was informed of the outcomes of the survey to identify causes, drivers, and impacts of DLD in North-East Asia, conducted in April 2023, and the *Expert Group Meeting on DLD and Climate Change: Subregional Approaches and Activities*, held from 19 to 20 June 2023 in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

12. The Meeting recognized the joint efforts between China and Mongolia through the establishment of the China-Mongolia Cooperation Center for Combating Desertification. The Meeting welcomed the interest of Mongolia to lead the thematic area of DLD, in connection with 17th Conference of Parties (COP-17) to the United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification (UNCCD) to be held in Mongolia in 2026, with a proposal to be submitted by the first quarter of 2024. The Meeting also welcomed the offer of China to provide technical support on DLD. The Meeting approved the proposed subregional approach for NEASPEC's work on DLD and the proposed activity plan for the remaining 2023 and 2024.

13. **Core Fund:** The Meeting appreciated the financial contributions of the member States to the Core Fund as well as the Project-based Fund. The Meeting encouraged the member States to provide continued financial and in-kind contributions for the implementation of NEASPEC programmes and activities. The Meeting requested the Secretariat for a more detailed breakdown of the expenditures of NEASPEC activities to ensure transparency. Noting the need to reallocate the budget due to the changes in the modalities of delivering the activities, the Meeting approved the revised budget plan for the project period 2021-2025 in accordance with the ESCAP procedure.

14. **Plan for the Next SOM:** The Meeting welcomed the statement of China to host the SOM-27, noting that the venue and time will be announced in due course, in consultations with the member States and the Secretariat.

15. The Meeting expressed its appreciation to the Republic of Korea and the Chair for the successful hosting and arrangement of the Meeting. The Chair expressed his appreciation to the Secretariat for its preparatory work for the SOM-26 and thanked delegations for their active and dedicated participation in the Meeting.

II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWENTY-SIXTH SENIOR OFFICIALS MEETING

A. Attendance

16. The Meeting was attended by the delegations from China, Japan, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, and the Russian Federation, together with experts and representatives of international organizations and partners.

B. Opening session

17. The Senior Officials Meeting was opened by Mr. Ganbold Baasanjav, Head of the UN ESCAP Subregional Office for East and North-East Asia. He welcomed the delegates and representatives of the 26th Senior Officials Meeting of NEASPEC (SOM-26), expressing gratitude to the Republic of Korea for hosting the meeting. Reflecting on NEASPEC's 30th anniversary event, he highlighted NEASPEC's vital role in addressing environmental challenges in North-East Asia and promoting sustainable development in the region. Emphasizing ongoing efforts, he sought continued support from member governments and partners to sustain NEASPEC's mandates.

18. Mr. Hyunsoo Yun, Director-General, Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Scientific Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, delivered the welcoming remarks as the SOM-26 Chair and on behalf of the host Government. He commended the development of NEASPEC over the 30 years since its establishment as a comprehensive mechanism for environmental cooperation in the subregion. Mr. Yun recalled two key guiding documents: (i) the Framework adopted at the SOM-3 in 1996, which defined the general principles and objectives of NEASPEC and designated the SOM as its governing body; and (ii) the Vision Statement adopted at the SOM-6 in 2000, which established the Core Fund to ensure the implementation of NEASPEC's work. He noted that NEASPEC has made tangible progress in five areas of cooperation, namely air pollution, biodiversity, marine protected areas, low carbon cities and desertification. In the area of air pollution, in particular, he exemplified NEACAP as a successful hub for knowledge exchange and capacity building from policy to technology and scientific cooperation with expectation of further development for Category II activities. He also noted the challenges facing NEASPEC, including slow progress partly due to COVID-19, and overlaps with existing mechanisms, which require re-evaluation and re-orientation of programmes. In view of these challenges and increasing environmental impacts including climate change, he emphasized the need to identify new areas of cooperation to make NEASPEC more relevant, to make more contributions to NEASPEC on a voluntary basis to enhance its effectiveness, and to optimise its operation through enhanced coordination, monitoring and evaluation to accelerate the progress of NEASPEC's activities, with a view to enhancing its function as the comprehensive mechanism for environmental cooperation in the subregion.

C. Election of officers

19. The Meeting elected the following officers:

Chair: Mr. Hyunsoo Yun (Republic of Korea)

Vice-Chair: Mr. Yoshinori Suga (Japan)

Rapporteur: Mr. Lie Cheng (China)

D. Adoption of the agenda

1. Opening of the Meeting
 - a) Opening remarks by the Head of ESCAP East and North-East Asia Office
 - b) Welcoming remarks by the Head of Delegation of the Host Government
2. Election of officers
3. Adoption of the agenda
4. Statements by delegations of member States, UN and international organizations on issues related to sustainable development in North-East Asia
5. Review of programme planning and implementation
 - a) Air Pollution
 - b) Biodiversity and Nature Conservation
 - c) Marine Protected Areas
 - d) Low Carbon Cities
 - e) Desertification and Land Degradation
6. Renewed commitments to NEASPEC
7. Review of the Core Fund and Project-based Fund
8. Venue, date, and provisional agenda of the Twenty-seventh SOM (SOM-27)
9. Other issues
10. Adoption of the conclusion and recommendations of the Meeting

E. Policy issues for sustainable development in North-East Asia

(Agenda item 4)

20. The representative of China highlighted the country's active role and contributions to NEASPEC's cooperation, emphasizing progress in five key areas. Firstly, on air pollution, the representative informed of China's effective integration of economic development with environmental protection, resulting in a significant reduction in PM 2.5 concentration and a decline in days of heavy air pollution. Secondly, China, as the chair of COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), played a pivotal role in reaching an agreement on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, demonstrating a commitment to biodiversity conservation. Thirdly, on marine protection, China indicated the establishment of over 250 marine protected areas, covering approximately 4.1% of its marine jurisdiction. The representative also expressed concerns about the

unilateral discharge of nuclear-contaminated water by one member and urged enhanced cooperation within NEASPEC to address the impact of the discharge on the subregional and global marine environment as well as the ecosystem. Fourthly, the representative emphasized China's commitment to low-carbon city development, actively promoting carbon neutrality and establishing numerous low-carbon initiatives. Lastly, on desertification management, the representative emphasized China's success in sand control and prevention, treating over 2000 hectares of sandy land and setting an example on ecological governance.

21. Noting the upcoming COP28 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Dubai and calling for collective efforts to combat climate change and jointly build a community of life between human and nature, the representative reaffirmed China's commitment to continuing its engagement and supporting NEASPEC's work across various thematic areas, pledging contributions to ecological maintenance, well-being enhancement, and the pursuit of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

22. The representative of Japan outlined Japan's approach to sustainable development, citing the establishment of the SDGs Promotion Headquarters, headed by the Prime Minister with all relevant Ministers, to oversee key initiatives, such as addressing climate change, promoting circular economy, environmental conservation, and biodiversity, all developed in accordance with the SDGs implementation Guiding Principles. He informed that Japan formulated its SDGs Action Plan 2022 based on the 2030 Agenda's 5 Ps (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership), with specific measure under the "Planet" category to combat global warming, marine plastic debris, and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

23. The representative of Japan highlighted the nation's ambitious goals, declaring a net-zero target by 2050 and aiming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 46% in 2030 compared to 2013 levels. The representative underscored Japan's engagement in international collaborations, such as the Joint Crediting Mechanism (JCM), to promote climate mitigation projects globally. He informed that the country has also taken steps to address the global issue of plastic pollution through advocating the Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, targeting the elimination of additional pollution by marine plastic litter by 2050.

24. Expressing appreciation of China's leadership of the global framework, the representative emphasized Japan's contribution to biodiversity initiatives, including hosting regional dialogues on the revision of National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) of the Parties through the Japan Biodiversity Fund and supporting the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. He highlighted the government's commitment to concurrently achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, a circular economy, and nature-positive revitalization for sustainable development and economic growth.

25. Regarding concerns about the discharge of ALPS treated water into the sea, the representative reiterated that the discharge has been carried out safely, with monitoring and involvement of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure negligible radiological impact on humans and the environment. He emphasized Japan's pledge to continue efforts to ensure safe discharges and

clarified that the issue falls outside the mandate of NEASPEC.

26. The representative of Mongolia informed that the country hosted the *High-Level Forum on Clean Air* in March in Ulaanbaatar, with a focus on fostering partnerships, cooperation, and stakeholder engagement. She acknowledged support from Japan and the Republic of Korea in enhancing Mongolia's national capacity for air quality monitoring. The representative highlighted measures taken to address air pollution, including transitioning the energy supply and production sector to the Ministry of Energy, enabling more effective actions against air pollution. Furthermore, the representative noted that Mongolia, since the ratification of the Kigali Amendment to the Ozone Convention, has synchronized government actions on air quality and climate.

27. The representative of Mongolia shared progress on biodiversity, with Mongolia committing to expanding protected area network, aiming to reach 30% of its total territorial state protected area by 2030, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The representative highlighted Mongolia's commitment to increasing the level of ambition and visibility of freshwater conservation and management.

28. Regarding desertification and land degradation, the representative mentioned that Mongolia hosted the *Expert Group Meeting on Desertification and Land Degradation and Climate Change: Subregional Approaches and Activities* with support of the NEASPEC Secretariat in June in Ulaanbaatar. The representative emphasized that the country aims to use UNCCD COP-17 as a platform for the subregion to showcase needs and demands, best practices, and achievements. The representative highlighted that Mongolia has been implementing successfully the One Billion Trees National Movement, garnering positive responses and actions from local communities and the private sector. She informed that in 2025, Mongolia will open a desertification and land degradation research and training centre with support from China.

29. The representative underscored the importance of enhancing cooperation on low carbon cities, aligning with Mongolia's commitment to the Paris Agreement. The representative highlighted the responsibility of Mongolian cities in contributing to climate change action. She informed that during UNFCCC COP-27, Mongolia officially joined the Global Methane Pledge. Bilateral cooperation in climate change efforts was emphasized, including the Framework Agreement for Cooperation on Climate Change with the Republic of Korea, celebrating the 10th anniversary of JCM with Japan, and strengthening cooperation with China on low carbon and green investment. The representative informed that the Ministry of Environment and Tourism is currently working on drafting a law on climate change.

30. The representative of the Republic of Korea extended a welcome to the delegation for the face-to-face SOM gathering after four years. She highlighted that the post-pandemic world is grappling with a triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, exacerbating challenges like extreme weather and deteriorating air quality. The representative then conveyed the government's commitment to the 2050 carbon neutrality goal and the 2030 NDC, announcing the Basic Plan on Carbon Neutrality and Green Growth in April 2023, a pragmatic and detailed implementation strategy outlining mid- to long-term mitigation targets and policies across various sectors. The

representative also noted that the Republic of Korea intended to its path towards the carbon-free economy by adopting pragmatic and technologically neutral concept of Carbon Free Energy (CFE) encompassing renewables, nuclear energy and hydrogen, and recently established the Carbon Free Alliance (CFA), an implementing body for the CFE initiative, with participation from Korea's major manufacturers. The representative also mentioned the Republic of Korea's efforts in addressing plastic pollution, informing the hosting of the fifth meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-5) in 2024 to contribute to an international binding instrument. She highlighted the country's progress in combatting air pollution, citing a 30% reduction in PM 2.5 concentrations in 2022. Emphasizing the government's dedication to enhancing cooperation on transboundary air pollution, she informed the organization of the 3rd International Forum on Transboundary Air Pollution in September 2023.

31. Concerning contaminated water stored at the Fukushima Daichi Nuclear Power Plant, she indicated the Korean government has consistently held the position that it should be safely disposed of in a scientific, objective and transparent manner and the entire process must be consistent with relevant international standards and laws. She added that the Republic of Korea has already put in place an effective multi-level monitoring mechanism including but not limited to the IAEA's provision of up-to-date information, Korean experts' visit to the IAEA's on-site office, and emergency communication channels. The representative stressed the paramount importance of monitoring whether Japan's actual discharge proceeds safely in accordance with the reviewed plan.

32. In commemorating the 30th anniversary of NEASPEC, the representative of the Republic of Korea reaffirmed the government's ongoing commitment to supporting comprehensive environmental cooperation in the region.

33. The representative of the Russian Federation expressed appreciation to the host government for its hospitality and commended the NEASPEC Secretariat for the well-coordinated arrangements. Emphasizing land degradation as a primary concern, he highlighted Russia's commitment to improve the quality of forest management, outlining a plan to ensure by 2024 a 100% balance between the areas of reforestation and afforestation. Drawing attention to the escalating issue of forest fires, he noted the acute challenges faced by many countries with significant resources, necessitating concerted efforts to combat wildfires.

34. The representative also shared the efforts of the whole community in conserving biological resources and emphasized the significance of implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. He pointed out that the country has accumulated unique experiences from establishing the largest developing system of specially protected natural areas, including marine protected areas. The primary focus is protecting unique animals such as amur tiger, amur leopard, and snow leopard. He underscored Russia's notable achievements in protecting habitats, expanding the network of specially protected natural areas, and combatting against illegal poaching, trafficking, and trade of endangered animal species.

35. The representative mentioned that the government developed a comprehensive and sustainable plan for integrated water resources management and indicated that more than 40,000

kilometers of the Russian border are adjacent to various water bodies and the basins of 70 large and medium-sized rivers in the country have transboundary characteristics. The representative further stated that the government is currently in the process of developing a joint water project, aiming to ensure the sustainable operation of the entire water management complex and reduce the levels of discharge of polluted wastewater. He highlighted that the government established a digital platform for drinking water sources with data on existing reserves. He emphasized that the unified registry would enable the country to regulate the production and distribution of groundwater sources. The representative affirmed that the government would continue supporting and actively participate in ongoing programmes of NEASPEC.

36. The representative of Japan clarified the statement on the “discharge of contaminated water”, emphasizing that the water contains radioactive materials are far below regulatory standards. He underscored that this low level is achieved through additional dilution of the ALPS treated water, which has already undergone sufficient purification. The representative of Japan called for a correction in the use of the term “discharge of contaminated water into the sea”, pointing out that such a description is not based on scientific evidence. He highlighted that the IAEA also emphasized the importance of precise terminology to prevent public confusion and advocated for a clear distinction between terms. The representative affirmed that the Japanese government would not permit the discharges of the water into the sea unless it complies with regulatory standards aligned with international standards.

37. The representative of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) conveyed gratitude to national governments for their dedicated efforts and commitments towards the conservation of migratory birds in collaboration with international organizations over the past years. She presented EAAFP's latest initiative, which involves establishing a university alliance across the East Asian-Australasian Flyway aimed at enhancing capacity for monitoring and research. She also mentioned the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s keen interest in monitoring techniques related to migratory birds. The representative underscored the significance of engaging with diverse stakeholders, ranging from national and local governments to civil societies and youth, in addressing the pressing issues of climate change and biodiversity loss.

38. The representative of CityNet, a network comprising over 100 cities in the Asia Pacific region, expressed keen interest in gaining further insights into the low carbon city practices implemented by the member States, which could be replicated in other countries as valuable models.

F. Presentations and discussions on substantive agenda items

(Agenda items 5, 6, and 7)

39. The Meeting heard presentations from the Secretariat on agenda item 5: Review of programme planning and implementation; agenda item 6: Renewed commitments to NEASPEC; agenda item 7: Review of the Core Fund and Project-based Fund, followed by interventions from the member States, partner organizations and experts. Key outcomes of discussions on these agenda items are included in the Conclusions and Recommendations in Section I of the Report of the Meeting.

Agenda item 5 (a) Air Pollution

40. The Meeting acknowledged the progress made in addressing air pollution in 2022 and 2023, aligning with the North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (NEACAP) Work Plan 2021-2025. The Meeting took note of the recommendations from the 5th meeting of the NEACAP Science and Policy Committee (SPC) held on 8 September 2023 in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The Meeting was briefed on the progress related to the policy analysis report and the review paper on the Best Available Techniques (BAT).

41. The representative of the Republic of Korea (ROK) commended the progress made in the BAT Review Paper and Policy Analysis Report, despite delays in the drafting process. Noting the SPC's recommendation to organize two policy dialogues in 2024, the representative of ROK suggested adopting and launching the report at the SOM-27 rather than at the 2nd Policy Dialogue. In this connection, the representative of ROK requested the Secretariat to develop a more detailed concept note for consideration by the member States to assess the necessity of holding a 2nd Policy Dialogue and suggested considering an option of holding the policy dialogue back-to-back with the SOM-27. Noting the little progress in Category II activities, the representative of ROK requested the SPC to initiate discussions and present a new work plan starting from 2025 onwards, outlining potential priority areas and activities for Category II. Emphasizing the need for Technical Centres (TCs) to play more active roles in joint research and capacity building for Category II, the representative of ROK stressed the importance of a clear work plan and defined roles for TCs. Commending the NEACAP Symposium held jointly with Korea's National Air Emission Inventory and Research Centre (NAIR) in conjunction with the SPC-5 in September 2023, the representative of ROK suggested continuing an annual symposium jointly organized by NAIR and the Secretariat to explore potential Category II areas. Affirming belief in NEACAP's potential as a comprehensive platform for policy, technology, and scientific cooperation to address air pollution in the region, the Republic of Korea committed to actively participating and contributing to NEACAP activities and programmes.

42. The representative of China proposed deleting pages 74 and 75 of the BAT Review Paper, deeming these sections unrelated to the preceding chapters of the Review Paper. The representative of China indicated that this proposed deletion is contingent upon the agreement of other member States and modifications to certain sections of the chapter could be considered. The representative also emphasized that countries can appropriately refer to the BAT Review Paper in their national contexts. In response to the Republic of Korea's proposal for a new timeline for the workplan including Category II activities like inventories and modelling, the representative of China recommended adhering to the existing workplan, prioritizing Category I on policy and technology cooperation, and capacity building for all categories.

43. On behalf of the Environment and Development Division of ESCAP, Mr. Sangmin Nam informed that ESCAP member States officially adopted the Regional Action Programme on Air Pollution (RAPAP), which includes a request to the ESCAP Secretariat to facilitate learning lessons from existing mechanisms, including NEACAP. Mr. Nam added that under RAPAP, the ESCAP Secretariat is currently implementing a series of capacity-building activities. Leveraging the extensive

experience gained not only at the NEACAP level but also at the domestic level of NEASPEC member States, ESCAP seeks to incorporate national policies to enhance its regional capacity-building efforts. To achieve this, Mr. Nam mentioned that the ESCAP Secretariat will collaborate with the NEASPEC Secretariat to identify joint activities that capitalize on the expertise of NEASPEC member States. Regarding Chapter 7 of the BAT Review Paper, Mr. Nam stated that recognizing its potential use as a reference for regional activities, certain elements of the Chapter could be adapted for regional activities, subject to the discretion of the member States.

44. The representative of Mongolia conveyed gratitude to the Secretariat and the expert involved in developing the BAT Review Paper, considering it a crucial achievement resulting from NEACAP activities. The representative of Mongolia also expressed satisfaction with the suggestions and recommendations in the BAT Review Paper, proposing to retain them as originally presented. Acknowledging the considerable time spent through the years in reaching a consensus on the air pollution agenda, the representative of Mongolia recommended checking the perspectives of each member State.

45. The Secretariat appreciated the guidance and suggestions from the member States. The Secretariat informed that it would have a bilateral consultation with China to address its concerns on the BAT Review Paper. The Secretariat also informed that it would furnish a detailed concept note for the 2nd Policy Dialogue for consideration of the member States on the necessity of holding a 2nd Policy Dialogue or the possibility of holding it in conjunction with the SOM-27. Noting the emphasis that capacity building is a continuing process across all activities, the Secretariat will incorporate this into the work plan, defining clear roles of the Technical Centres (TC) to support such activities. The Secretariat will work on organizing the NEACAP Symposium on an annual basis.

46. The Meeting approved the proposed activity plan on air pollution for the remaining 2023 to 2024.

Agenda item 5 (b) Biodiversity and Nature Conservation

47. Noting the progress achieved by NEASPEC on biodiversity and nature conservation, the Meeting was briefed on the outcomes of projects, including *Transboundary Cooperation on the Conservation of Amur tiger, Amur leopard and Snow leopard in North-East Asia*, and *Transboundary Cooperation among Protected Wetlands in the Lower Tumen River Area*. The Meeting took note of the progress of the project on *Evaluation of the Current Status of the Transboundary Snow Leopard Subpopulation in the Border Area between Mongolia and the Russian Federation*, and the potential funding for *Connectivity Conservation for Habitats of Flagship Migratory Birds in North-East Asia* from the Russian Federation.

48. The representative of the Russian Federation affirmed the country's ongoing commitment to biodiversity and nature conservation. Expressing interest in both completed and proposed projects, the representative noted the pending financial support for the project on migratory birds, which is to be discussed with the relevant ministry.

49. The representative of Mongolia highlighted the significance of the Landscapes of Dauria, UNESCO World Heritage Site, as a very important transboundary protected area for China, Mongolia, and the Russian Federation. She shared that Mongolia recently submitted its conservation plan to IUCN and UNESCO World Heritage Commission (WHC), expecting to receive final comments and recommendations by mid-2024. Expressing appreciation to the Russian Federation for supporting monitoring activities of the Snow leopard, the representative introduced that Mongolia and the Russian Federation agreed in July 2023 on 20 action plans for 2024-2028 for transboundary conservation, which includes the Snow leopard and the Great Bustard (Goose). She also stressed the importance of cooperation through the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) for monitoring and tracking of the Snow leopard. Mentioning that Mongolia hosted the International Seminar on Central Asian Flyway Initiative in August 2023, which was held in conjunction with the 14th Conference of Parties (COP) of CMS scheduled for February 2024 in Uzbekistan, the representative introduced the Mongolian government's efforts on the Goose conservation, including key activities to improve Goose family conservation in line with the commitment of Mongolia under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). She shared that the Mongolian government has initiated its action to localize the GBF, especially with the Ministry of Economy and Development to mainstream biodiversity conservation in its development process and expressed interests to listen from other member States on the progress in localizing GBF into national level.

50. The representative of China commended the biodiversity and nature conservation projects as exemplary cross-border cooperation in the subregion. He added China's substantial efforts in hosting CBD COP-15 and facilitating bi-/tri-lateral cooperation with Mongolia and the Russian Federation on the big cat conservation.

51. The representative of Japan welcomed the progress made in transboundary cooperation for the conservation of big feline species.

52. The representative of the Republic of Korea expressed gratitude for the big cat conservation project. Indicating that the Amur tiger and leopard are listed as class one endangered species in the Republic of Korea, the representative suggested that the project recommendations would be implemented with robust support and active participation from the member States. Emphasizing the need for streamlined information sharing and goal setting across various levels of biodiversity conservation, she proposed establishing a knowledge sharing platform to bridge existing gaps, foster harmonization of local, national and global efforts into cohesive regional framework, and ultimately enhance collective contribution to the goals and targets outlined in GBF. The representative requested the Secretariat to include a plan on the suggested knowledge sharing platform in the activity plan in 2025. She supported the proposed activity plan for the remaining 2023 to 2024 and indicated an intention to host a workshop on biodiversity and nature conservation for transboundary cooperation during the first half of 2024, anticipating the workshop would be a pivotal forum for the exchange of knowledge and information among the member States fostering a collective commitment to the shared goal. The representative suggested the Secretariat prepare a concept paper and budget implications for the suggested knowledge sharing platform for further discussion with the member States.

53. The Secretariat appreciated the intention of the Republic of Korea in organizing the workshop on biodiversity and nature conservation for transboundary cooperation in 2024 and acknowledged the request from the Republic of Korea to prepare a plan to establish a knowledge sharing platform within the NEASPEC programme areas.

54. The Meeting approved the proposed activity plan on biodiversity and nature conservation for the remaining 2023 to 2024.

Agenda item (c) Marine Protected Areas

55. The Meeting took note of the progress achieved by the North-East Asian Marine Protected Areas Network (NEAMPAN) since the SOM-25 including the studies on Ocean-based Climate Actions of the North-East Asia Marine Protected Areas Network (NEAMPAN) for China and the Republic of Korea, as well as the expansion plan for NEAMPAN.

56. The representative of China commended NEAMPAN as another successful story of cross-border cooperation within NEASPEC and expressed its interest in hosting a NEAMPAN workshop in the first half of 2024. He expressed concerns about the unilateral discharge of nuclear-contaminated water into the ocean and the impact on the work of NEASPEC, urging NEASPEC to enhance cooperation in marine-related areas to address it.

57. The representative of Japan reiterated the Government of Japan's commitment to transparently explain its efforts to the international community. He expressed willingness to discuss details in appropriate forums with relevant expertise, clarifying that NEASPEC is not an appropriate forum for this particular issue.

58. The representative of the Republic of Korea shared its plans to consistently designate and expand Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to contribute to the 30x30 goals within the GBF. She indicated the continued support for the successful completion of the first tailored study on the impact of climate change on MPAs in the Republic of Korea. The representative agreed in principle with the step-by-step approach for the NEAMPAN site expansion plan and suggested focusing on a social network initially, followed by an ecological network, after assessing the results of the initial phase. Anticipating the NEAMPAN workshop in China in 2024, she expressed expectation for the workshop to reinvigorate NEAMPAN activities additional nomination of NEAMPAN sites. The representative reaffirmed continued support for enhancing cooperation among MPAs in the subregion through NEAMPAN, ultimately contributing to achieving the GBF goals.

59. Mr. Jungho Nam, the resource person from the Korea Maritime Institute, shared his perspectives on enhancing NEAMPAN's functionality. He recommended workplans encompassing cross-sectoral issues in line with NEASPEC's biodiversity and nature conservation thematic area, considering that MPAs including NEAMPAN sites contain key habitats of NEASPEC flagship species. He also emphasized aiming ambitiously for the site expansion in terms of both quantity (number) and scope (areas). In addition, he proposed that NEAMPAN should evolve into a network of

networks to better address climate change and strengthen ocean-based solutions in the subregion.

60. Mr. Sangmin Nam, representing the Environment and Development Division (EDD) of ESCAP, informed the Meeting about ESCAP member States' adoption of a resolution on "Regional cooperation to accelerate climate action on oceans in Asia and the Pacific for sustainable development" at the 79th session of Commission in May 2023, initiated by Indonesia and sponsored by Maldives and Fiji. He highlighted plans for the Ocean Dialogue in October 2024, focusing on ocean-based climate action, and indicated that the outcomes will be presented at the UN Ocean Dialogue 2025 in France. He recognized the planned studies for China and the Republic of Korea within NEAMPAN as crucial inputs for the Ocean Dialogue and expressed intent to facilitate collaboration between NEAMPAN Secretariat and ESCAP member States to connect the study with the regional dialogue.

61. The representative of the Russian Federation informed the Meeting that the country has designated approximately 12,000 protected areas at the federal, regional and local levels, covering about 232 million hectares. He pointed out that targets 2 and 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework do not specifically mention the protection of 30 per cent of marine areas, and considered it inappropriate to emphasize the need for gradual expansion of the network of marine protected areas.

62. The Meeting approved the proposed activity plan on marine protected areas for the remaining 2023 to 2024.

Agenda item (d) Low Carbon Cities

63. The Meeting acknowledged the progress of the North-East Asia Low Carbon Cities Platform (NEA-LCCP) activities, specifically, knowledge sharing and peer learning through the international forums on low carbon cities and the compendium of best practices on low-carbon cities in North-East Asia.

64. The representative of Japan shared the commitment of local governments in achieving carbon neutrality, where 991 subnational areas have declared the goal of being carbon neutral by 2050. He also expressed Japan's willingness to contribute to the low carbon cities programme by sharing the experiences and initiatives of Japan and informed of the ongoing discussion with the Secretariat for the collaboration in organizing the international forum on low carbon cities in 2024.

65. The representative of the Russian Federation expressed interest in organizing the international forum on low carbon cities in September 2024 during the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok.

66. The representative of Mongolia also expressed interest in hosting the international forum on low carbon cities to share the experience of cities in Mongolia and encourage active engagement. She also requested that the Secretariat consider the timing of major environment-related events planned in 2024 when organizing the forum, to ensure the participation of all the member States and possibly

scheduling the forum back-to-back with those events.

67. Commending the Secretariat on the progress made in low-carbon cities, the representative of China introduced its progress in transitioning to low carbon cities in China and reiterated its continued commitments to encouraging local governments to actively participate in the low carbon city programme.

68. The representative of the Republic of Korea introduced the National Basic Plan for Carbon Neutrality and Green Growth announced in April 2023, featuring a bottom-up approach led by provinces and cities to ensure the development of local-level carbon neutrality plans customized to their local conditions and characteristics. Commending the success of the 2nd and 3rd international forums on low carbon cities, jointly organized with the Incheon Metropolitan City, in highlighting the crucial role of cities and local governments, the representative requested that the Secretariat continue its work on providing avenues for knowledge sharing and capacity building for local governments in North-East Asia.

69. The Meeting approved the proposed activity plan on low carbon cities for the remaining 2023 to 2024.

Agenda item (e) Desertification and Land Degradation

70. The Meeting noted the progress towards developing the NEASPEC approach to addressing desertification and land degradation (DLD), avoiding duplications and ensuring synergies with existing subregional platforms. The Meeting was informed of the outcomes of the Expert Group Meeting on Desertification and Land Degradation and Climate Change, jointly organized with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia in June 2023, and reviewed the proposed subregional approach and activities for NEASPEC.

71. The representative of Mongolia welcomed the proposed subregional approach and activities for NEASEPC on DLD and requested the Secretariat to work closely with the Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought Northeast Asia Network (DLDD-NEAN) of UNCCD. Noting the rapid decrease in productive land areas, she suggested considering work under NEASPEC on sand and dust storms in the coming years. The representative also expressed willingness to collaborate closely with the Secretariat in implementing the proposed activities on DLD. She informed of Mongolia's plan to submit a proposal on the future work of DLD for the consideration of the member States and the Secretariat.

72. Highlighting the importance of bilateral and subregional cooperation on addressing DLD, the representative of China introduced the establishment of the China-Mongolia Cooperation Center for Combating Desertification. The representative also reiterated China's commitment to providing technical support and sharing experiences for effective desertification cooperation in North-East Asia.

73. The Meeting approved the proposed activity plan on desertification and land degradation for the remaining 2023 to 2024.

Agenda item 6. Renewed Commitments to NEASPEC

74. The Meeting adopted the Commemorative Statement on Promoting Environmental Cooperation in North-East Asia on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of NEASPEC (see Annex I).

Agenda item 7. Review of the Core Fund and Project-based Fund

75. The Meeting noted the status of the NEASPEC Core Fund and Project-based Fund as of 31 July 2023, reflecting savings related to travel costs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Meeting noted the Secretariat's proposal to reclassify local staff funded by the NEASPEC Core Fund from the team assistant (GS-4) position to research assistant (GS-5) position, considering the nature of work required for the post. The Meeting considered the Secretariat's proposed revised budget plan for 2021 to 2025, redeploying travel budgets and operating expenses to contractual services and staff and other personnel costs.

76. The Meeting expressed appreciation to the member States and partner organizations that have made financial and/or in-kind contributions to the Core Fund and Project-based Fund.

77. The representative of the Republic of Korea reiterated its commitment to provide contributions to the NEASPEC Core Fund and encouraged the member States for voluntary contributions, recognizing contributions from China. The representative requested that the Secretariat provide more details and breakdown of expenditures to ensure transparency.

78. The representative of China reaffirmed its commitment to provide contributions to the NEASPEC Core Fund. Nothing that the member States have common but differentiated responsibilities and all contributions should be made on a voluntary basis, the representative also noted that the use of the Core Fund should be transparent and member States-driven.

79. The Secretariat appreciated the member States for their continued contributions to the Core Fund. Informing that the document on the review of the Core Fund and Project-Based Fund was provided in line with ESCAP standard expenditure categories, the Secretariat agreed to take appropriate measures in respond to the member States' request for more details and breakdown of expenditures.

80. The Meeting approved the revised budget plan for the project period 2021-2025.

G. Venue, date and provisional agenda of the Twenty-Fourth Senior Officials Meeting

(Agenda item 9)

81. The Meeting discussed the venue, date, and agenda of the Twenty-Seventh Session of the Senior Officials Meeting of NEASPEC. The Meeting expressed its appreciation to the Government of China for generously offering to host the next Meeting. The proposed dates, venue and the provisional agenda will be announced in due course, in consultation with the member States and the

Secretariat.

H. Other Issues

(Agenda item 10)

82. The Meeting expressed deep appreciation to the Government of the Republic of Korea for generously hosting the Twenty-Sixth Session of the Senior Officials Meeting with warm hospitality and excellent arrangements, and to the Secretariat for the excellent preparation of the Meeting.

I. Adoption of the Report

(Agenda item 11)

83. The Meeting adopted the Conclusions and Recommendations of the Senior Officials Meeting on 24 November 2023. The report of the Meeting was finalized and adopted by circulating it among the member States after the Senior Officials Meeting.

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Annex I.

NEASPEC Commemorative Statement on Promoting Environmental Cooperation in North-East Asia

1. We, the member States of the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC),
2. Having met in Seoul from 23 to 24 November 2023 in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of NEASPEC, which was established in 1993 in Seoul, Republic of Korea,
3. Recalling the NEASPEC Framework, adopted at the third Senior Officials Meeting (SOM-3) in 1996, defining the goal of the framework as a means to promote subregional environmental cooperation and sustainable development efforts, has enhanced capacities of the member States in environmental management efforts, and has facilitated step-by-step and practical approaches that could be used as building blocks for strengthening subregional cooperation,
4. Noting the Vision Statement for Environmental Cooperation in North-East Asia, adopted at the SOM-6 in 2000, recommending a periodical review of the environmental conditions and trends as well as the implementation of priority projects in North-East Asia, has promoted common policy dialogues on approaches, views and coordinated actions on subregional environmental issues and developed the NEASPEC into a comprehensive programme,
5. Acknowledging that NEASPEC has made significant and tangible progress in subregional environmental cooperation in programmatic areas, namely air pollution, biodiversity and nature conservation, marine protected areas, low carbon cities, and desertification and land degradation, and the establishment of thematic platforms, namely the North-East Asia Clean Air Partnership (NEACAP), North-East Asian Marine Protected Areas Network (NEAMPAN), and North-East Asia Low Carbon Cities Platform (NEA-LCCP) making NEASPEC a unique environmental cooperation mechanism in North-East Asia, that is tailored to the specific subregional characteristics and needs of the member States for concerted efforts to improve environmental sustainability,
6. Recognizing that human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development, and they are entitled to healthy and productive life in harmony with nature, and subregional and regional environmental issues should be effectively addressed through concerted and joint efforts of all the member States concerned,
7. Considering the need to address ongoing large-scale environmental challenges prevalent in the subregion, to enhance NEASPEC's contribution to global environmental benefits in a timely and effective manner, and to explore new areas of cooperation,
8. Reaffirming commitments of the member States to global goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), goals and objectives of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement, and the Kunming-Montreal Global

Biodiversity Framework of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and the need and benefit of subregional cooperation through NEASPEC considering its thematic interlinkages and collaboration with other relevant global, regional and sub-regional mechanisms, platforms and initiatives,

9. Taking note of the need for reducing disparities in the capacity of the member States to address domestic and regional environmental challenges and improve the environmental sustainability in the region,
10. Remaining committed to the original aspiration of NEASPEC, maintaining the intergovernmental process and emphasizing the role of the member States in decision-making and policy guidance on the subregional cooperation, making holistic and systemic efforts to enhance co-benefits of environment and economic development, and meeting our expectations for a clean and beautiful world and sustainable development,
11. We, the member States of NEASPEC, envision:
 - a. **Accelerating the progress of NEASPEC's activities, projects and platforms in five programmatic areas** by optimizing its operation of coordination and decision-making processes, developing joint actions, promoting science-policy linkages, utilizing innovative tools and resources of implementation, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation of programme implementation,
 - b. **Bolstering NEASPEC's relevance to tackling environmental challenges and delivering concrete benefits for the subregion and beyond**, by aligning its work with national, regional and global goals and priorities, strengthening its ties with partners and stakeholders, and identifying new areas of collaboration that can be effectively addressed by NEASPEC,
 - c. **Developing subregional knowledge base and capacity through NEASPEC's works for the member States** by promoting policy dialogue and provision of technical support, exchanging knowledge, information, experiences and good practices, and interacting and cooperating with various stakeholders in the subregion and beyond, and
 - d. **Enhancing the effectiveness of NEASPEC's work** by strengthening practical project cooperation, making the best use of existing resources, enhancing the Senior Officials Meetings (SOM) mechanism, encouraging voluntary contributions of the member States to NEASPEC, and strengthening linkages and coordination with other relevant national, regional and global initiatives.