



Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR), The Regional Working Group on Environment (RWGE), 2012-2013

Background

The Barents Regional Working Group on Environment work is naturally problem oriented and aimed at issues essential to the region within a relatively short time frame. The discussions and activities therefore focus on the most urgent problems. At the same time, long-term objectives must be kept in mind. The status of the environment in the Barents region varies a great deal. A common challenge for the whole Barents area is an on-going climate change and adaption to a global warming.

The main tasks of the Barents Regional Working Group on Environment are to act as a network for environmental authorities in the Barents region and to ensure that environmental issues in the region are continuously taken into consideration and given priority on the national and international levels. Also RWGE has to promote local and regional competence to engage in environmental work on the international level and to improve the exchange of information and know-how between the different regions by project implementation.

Goals

It would hardly be possible to cover the range of tasks that fall within the framework of BEAR's environmental work in any meaningful way. Instead priority must be given to the strategically most important areas and the work must be closely integrated nationally and internationally.

RWGE activities have been divided during the last years into the following main items, where climate change can be seen as a cross sector item:

- Surface and drinking water
- Biodiversity
- Minerals and mining
- Information and building of public awareness and knowledge

Concrete project proposals on environmental issues mentioned above can be incorporated in the overall Barents program. Projects may ultimately be financed by various EU programs, bilateral cooperation programs, international financing bodies, etc. Active participation of the Russian counterparts in project preparation, implementation and financing has a vital importance.

Activities

Surface and drinking water

The state of the natural waters in Barents area is good in many cases, but where the state is concerned, the most important environmental issues are acidification, heavy metals and POPs. All these threats are caused by industrial emissions. Concrete water related projects have been implemented during the last years in close cooperation with WGE Subgroup on water issues. These projects are reported detailed in WGE report.

The most important areas of regional cooperation with water issues have been harmonizing of water quality and water ecology monitoring programs, especially in transboundary areas according to water framework directive and other national programs. Project on ground water based small and medium scale drinking water sources in the Russian Barents has been implemented with EU financing. Knowledge on purification technologies on small scale municipal wastewater has been transferred within the Barents regions.

Biodiversity

Nature in the Barents area is vulnerable to environmental changes and this is very important to notice also in the context of climate change effects in the area. Throughout the Barents region there has been an extensive designation of protected areas but large biodiversity values can also be found outside these areas. It is important to develop information and knowledge regarding biodiversity issues.

Habitat Contact Forum has been a very active and important part of the biodiversity co-operation in Barents area and last time the forum was arranged in Norway (Bodö) 2013. From the regional point of view it's very important to continue this co-operation in the future. Green Belt of Fennoscandia initiative and the MoU signed in 2010 is an important follow up of regional level co-operation on biodiversity and protected area management.

Minerals and mining

RWGE believes that increased and conscious networking of the different actors of the sector throughout the region would be an appropriate way of channeling the positive forces to benefit the environment and stimulate development and joint co-operation in general as well.

RWGE has taken part in the arrangement of the Barents mining conference in Rovaniemi 2013, where information on environmental issues in mining activities was delivered. Also a project has been set up by the Swedes for the transfer of methodological competence and experience between regional authorities that regulate mining and environmental issues in the Barents area. There is a need for information change on general principles in permit granting and control of mining activities.

Increased environmental consciousness and influence – public awareness

The environmental consciousness of the people, enterprises and authorities in the Barents region should be increased and possibilities for different social groups to engage in active environmental cooperation should be promoted. These objectives are reached by the conferences on different regional environmental topics. Also RWGE meetings are a good platform to exchange environmental information within Barents region. Excursions as a part of regular RWGE meetings also appropriate to exchange information. Web pages are used for disseminating information on the environmental situation of the Barents region in several environmental projects.