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Ministry of the Environment and Energy

New Swedish environmental policy for the Arctic

The Arctic is an irreplaceable asset of local, national and global significance. We need to strengthen and improve security and environmental protection in the Arctic. Sweden will work to ensure that all development in the Arctic is environmentally sustainable. Our priorities include greater protection of biodiversity and ecosystems on land and at sea, enhanced climate efforts and sustainable use of resources.

The Arctic region is changing rapidly in a way that may transform both ecosystems and living conditions for Arctic communities. Climate change is causing fundamental changes in the Arctic, with consequences for biodiversity and ecosystems, and for human living conditions, that will have repercussions throughout the world. In addition, climate change will increase the possibility of exploitation and increased use of Arctic natural resources.

The average temperature in the Arctic has increased by twice as much as in the rest of the world, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that the dramatic temperature rises will continue in the region – resulting in warming of around 10 degrees in winter. The tree line in the Swedish mountains has already advanced by several hundred metres. Scientific research shows an increasing risk of crossing large-scale tipping points in the Arctic, such as the collapse of the summer ice, melting ice sheets and methane emissions from melting permafrost, which may all have very significant global consequences. Curbing warming in the Arctic is therefore a global concern.

The biodiversity and ecosystems in the Arctic are irreplaceable assets of global importance. Many Arctic species, ecosystems and habitats are at risk of disappearing completely, or remaining only as isolated fragments. Forceful measures must be implemented if we are to halt this trend and protect biodiversity and valuable ecosystem services. The Arctic sea ice is shrinking, with the lowest extent in modern times observed in 2012. Increasingly large areas are now opening up for shipping and exploitation

of natural resources such oil, gas and fish. As yet unaffected vulnerable ecosystems at sea and on land in great need of protection require robust regulatory frameworks providing a high level of protection with respect to the exploitation of natural resources and shipping. This is crucial to preserving the unique values in the Arctic.

Sweden will work to ensure that the environmental dimension in the Arctic Council is strengthened and advocates more active participation by the environment ministers of the Arctic countries in the Arctic Council's work. One important part of this is active and strategic bilateral environment and climate cooperation with partners such as Russia and the United States.

The Government has identified three overall priorities for its commitment to greater environmental protection of the Arctic.

1. Stronger climate efforts

The Arctic environment is particularly sensitive. A fundamental element in limiting climate change in the Arctic is international climate cooperation that keeps global warming below two degrees. The Government's approach to this work is outlined in its climate strategy produced ahead of the UN Climate Conference in Paris in December 2015.

The Arctic countries have a particular duty to raise the climate issue and lead the way on global action because of their responsibility for the Arctic, and also because together they are responsible for a large proportion of global greenhouse gas emissions. The Government therefore wants to strengthen the Arctic Council's climate and renewable energy measures. Concrete measures are needed to reduce emissions of climate forcers and to communicate the effects of climate change in the Arctic.

In addition, a reduction in emissions of short-lived climate forcers such as soot and methane remains a priority. With the agreement to reduce emissions concluded at the Arctic Council's meeting of foreign ministers in Iqaluit on 24 April 2015, the Arctic countries are taking the lead. The agreement includes commitments to both enhanced national measures and joint measures to reduce emissions of soot and methane.

Another essential component of an active environmental policy for the Arctic is strengthening resilience, that is, the ability of people and nature to manage and adapt to those adverse effects of climate change that cannot be avoided. Sweden continues to give priority to this work and the Government is working for the Arctic Council to adopt clear recommendations in 2017 to strengthen resilience in the Arctic.

2. Better protection of biodiversity and ecosystems

In its reports and analyses, the Arctic Council has shown that biodiversity in the Arctic is under threat, but it is still possible to preserve large, relatively unaffected ecosystems both on land and at sea – if measures are taken now. The Government is allocating considerable resources over the next few years to strengthen efforts in Sweden to preserve and protect valuable natural habitats as part of the work to achieve the national environmental quality objectives.

The Government considers that protecting valuable natural habitats is also an important aspect of regional and international efforts. The Government therefore supports the process under way in the Arctic Council to implement the recommendations of the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment, including efforts to establish networks of protected areas. Protecting habitats in the Arctic is also in line with the commitment under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity to conserve at least ten per cent of coastal and marine areas and 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water by 2020.

The need for enhanced protection of marine areas beyond national jurisdiction also applies to the Arctic. The Government wants to see an implementing agreement for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea with the overall aim of protecting and preserving marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. However, it will be many years before such an implementing agreement can enter into force, and this highlights the importance of continued commitment to increased protection in other forums, particularly within the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR). The Government works actively in this forum to promote decisions to protect marine areas beyond national jurisdiction.

The Arctic needs sustainable management that safeguards both the region's important ecosystem services and the traditional trades of indigenous peoples, and the collection of knowledge and its dissemination. The Government therefore supports the various initiatives to ensure that all activities and projects undertaken as part of the Arctic Council's work incorporate ecosystem-based management, i.e. a balance between conservation and exploitation of biodiversity.

There are currently no mechanisms to take decisions on several of the management measures needed to safeguard the unique Arctic environment. The Government therefore supports the US initiative to produce a preliminary study on a new regional instrument for the Arctic Ocean. Sweden will participate actively in this work.

3. Sustainable use of resources

A large proportion of the world's oil and natural gas resources are found in the Arctic region. As the ice melts, the opportunities for new shipping channels increase and it becomes easier to access new areas for oil and mineral extraction. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is the fundamental international instrument regulating coastal states' right to extract natural resources on the continental shelf. At the same time, the international community has now agreed that global warming must remain under two degrees. To achieve this target, the extraction of oil and gas for burning must be restricted. Every country has a responsibility to take appropriate measures to achieve the target. This is particularly important at sea in the Arctic because the risks associated with extraction in cold waters are high. Robust regulations ensuring the highest possible level of protection on existing oil and gas installations are needed, along with full financial coverage for the costs that may arise in the event of an accident. This particularly applies in areas with permanent or temporary ice cover, where the risk of damaging biodiversity is particularly high.

The movements of fish stocks have changed over time. The parts of the Arctic Ocean and seabeds that have historically been covered by a permanent layer of sea ice must now be protected. Sweden believes that commercial fishing in the central Arctic Ocean should not be allowed until a regional fisheries management organisation to ensure regulated and sustainable fishing is established. Sweden considers generally that a precautionary approach should be taken and that consideration should be given to ecosystems when designing a system of fisheries management in the Arctic. This means that the management should be informed by decisions made on scientific grounds, with a long-term perspective, and should seek to ensure that adverse effects on marine ecosystems are minimised and that fishing does not lead to a deterioration of the marine environment. Sweden welcomes the fact that other countries also support such an approach, as evidenced by the declaration on unregulated fishing adopted by the Arctic coastal states in July 2015.

With access to the Arctic area rapidly growing, shipping is expected to increase. New transport routes for shipping, the energy and mineral resources and the region's strategic position will also attract increased interest from many different stakeholders. This implies considerable environmental risks and requires clear regulatory frameworks. The Polar Code adopted in November 2014 is an important part of this work. It includes both regulations concerning environmental considerations, and construction and equipment requirements. The Arctic Council's work to identify particularly valuable areas to be protected from the negative effects of shipping and other activities that may have an impact

represents another important contribution to increasing protection of the Arctic Ocean.

Sweden will be a frontrunner in sustainable development in the mining industry. The Government intends to create new models for the development of environmentally sustainable mining and community development, with mining taking its financial responsibility. In the case of prospecting and mining, it is important that high nature values are not irrevocably lost. Environmental requirements must therefore be reviewed and, where necessary, tightened.