

REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM

Second Meeting, Bangkok, Thailand
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Welcome and Introductory Remarks

By

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Vice Minister Prinya Nutalaya, Participants and observers to this second meeting of the Regional Environmental Forum, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Morning.

On behalf of the World Resources Institute, I welcome you to this meeting. WRI is an environmental think tank that goes beyond research to find practical ways to protect the earth and improve people's lives. Our mission is to move human society to live in ways that protect Earth's environment and its capacity to provide for the needs and aspirations of current and future generations. Our work and presence in this region, including supporting the establishment and the convening of this forum, is motivated by this mission.

The Regional Environmental Forum (REF) is an annual platform for open exchange, discussion and networking about environmental issues in mainland Southeast Asia. It is a joint initiative of networks of NGOs and individuals from or active in the region. It emerged from the Mekong Regional Environmental Governance (MREG) activity undertaken by WRI and its partners in 2000-2001 under the Resources Policy Support Initiative (REPSI). As such, it was originally designed to provide a forum for civil society groups to:

- Exchange information and analysis on the state of the region's environment;
- Discuss trends in environmental governance;
- Strengthen their own networks; and
- Develop a common agenda for promoting socially just, environmentally sustainable development across the region.

The first REF was held in 14-15 November 2002 in Phnom Penh` Cambodia with a theme of *Advancing Environmental Governance*. 35 participants, principally from NGOs and research institutions, participated in that meeting. After two days of deliberation, participants agreed on a joint statement providing concrete recommendations to governments, multilateral institutions, private corporations, and civil society groups for strengthening environmental governance in the region. The statement outlined five areas in need of improvement:

- Regional environmental governance
- Public access to environmental information
- Environmental impact assessments
- Enforcement of environmental regulations
- Access to justice in environmental matters

In the first REF, three emerging international norms of environmental governance were also identified: (1) Integration of environment into development decision-making; (2) Transboundary cooperation; and (3) Public access to information and decision-making,

REF 2004 with a theme of "Sustainable Development and Environmental Governance: Implementing Access to Information, Public Participation, and Justice" builds on the conclusions of the first meeting. This theme was agreed to, in October 2003, by the Steering Committee of the REF. In this REF, we will therefore be focusing on principles of access to information, public participation and justice in environmental governance as articulated in Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

The decision to adopt the Access theme, while arrived at after considerable deliberation, was not difficult to reach. Indeed, there was an unequivocal consensus in the Steering Committee that furthering the implementation of access was an essential element for achieving improved environmental governance and ensuring superior sustainable development outcomes. As a result, the Committee gave the Thailand Environment Institute and WRI, within certain parameters and subject to continuing consultations conducted electronically with the members of the committee, the mandate to design and convene this meeting.

The Steering Committee also instructed us to develop a design for a meeting that would lead to concrete outcomes. In this spirit, although a consensus statement or declaration can have immense value, we decided not to make an effort toward this end but instead propose that this meeting be principally a brainstorming session, a sharing of experiences and collective insight, an exploration of ideas - on how to further implement the access principles at the national and regional level using practical tools and approaches. This is why, in this meeting, we will be introducing a methodology for independently assessing government performance on the access principles. This methodology was developed by a coalition of civil society organizations collectively known as The Access Initiative, and has been piloted in a number of countries. The concept of independent assessment has also been accepted, in principle, by governments, international organizations and civil society groups that have joined the Partnership for Principle 10, a partnership launched during the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development.

In its October meeting, the Steering Committee also decided to expand participation to the REF in two ways: First, we were mandated to invite government officials, in their individual capacity, with the goal of having a frank and fruitful exchange that hopefully will result in greater cooperation. Second, the Steering Committee agreed to invite colleagues from other countries in Southeast Asia, specifically the Philippines and Indonesia, in the hope that they will share their experiences on access even as they too can learn from the experiences of Mainland Southeast Asia. With this expansion decision, we anticipate a broader discussion and debate in this meeting, perhaps more contentious but certainly and ultimately more productive.

In conclusion, let me thank all of you for joining us in this second meeting of the Regional Environment Forum. Let me also use this opportunity to acknowledge our donors. In particular, WRI would like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) which has been the main supporter of REPSI from its inception to this day. We would like to thank especially the Swedish Environment Secretariat in Asia (SENSA), based here at the Swedish Embassy in Bangkok, which made it possible for us to expand participation in the REF. We would not have been able to support the convening of this meeting without also the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and the Ford Foundation. Let me also acknowledge the contribution, in travel support, in kind and by their presence here, of our international partners. And finally, but certainly not the least, WRI would like to thank the members of the Steering Committee who have contributed their precious time and energy so that we could convene the REF. And, of course, among the Steering Committee, we wish to express our special gratitude to the Thailand Environment Institute for taking on the challenge and burden of organizing this meeting.

Thank you and good morning.