

SUMMARY

The Republic of Belarus is located in the central part of Europe. Its area is 207,600 sq. km, and its population is about 10 million people. The country has plain relief, and the average altitude above sea is around 160 m. These are positive prerequisites for proliferation of human dwellings and use of land for agriculture, construction of industries and highways. The geographic position of the country, its diverse natural heritage make Belarus one of the key elements of the Ecological Network of Europe (EECONET).

Over the recent decades, the country's soil cover has been affected by a number of negative processes (decreased fertility, increased water and wind erosion, chemical pollution and radioactive contamination, humus destruction, etc.). These were brought about both by natural, as well as technogenic factors.

Eroded and erosion-prone soils in Belarus cover about 4.0 million ha (19% of the territory of the country), including 2.3 million ha of arable lands. 84% of all soil-destruction processes are caused by water erosion. Deflation makes up the remaining 16%. The per capita share of agricultural lands in Belarus is about twice as much as in other European countries - 0.92 ha per person, including 0.58 ha of arable lands.

Agricultural and forested lands contaminated with radiation as a result of Chernobyl accident in April 1986 make up a special group of lands. About 70% of all radionuclides descended on Belarus. Currently, about 23% of the country's area is contaminated with radiation, including 1.3 million ha of agricultural and 1.6 million ha of forest lands. These lands present an additional risk of secondary contaminant transfer, which can be caused by soil deflation, especially intense at draughts and during fires.

One of the causes of land degradation in Belarus is the large-scale drainage campaign carried out in 1960-1980s. More than 3.4 million ha were drained, which is 16.4% of the country's area. Out of this number, about 1 million ha were wetlands, which brought about a number of negative ecological problems, such as peat mineralization, augmented land degradation, more frequent draughts and early frosts, disruptions in the hydrological regime, etc.). Especially critical was the situation in the Belarusian Polesie, where more than 40% of wetlands were drained.

Therefore, Belarus' accession to the UNCCD in 2001 is a timely action and will activate international cooperation and experience exchange in the area of land degradation, as well as stimulate investment and donor support to implementation of measures to combat land degradation and minimize the consequences of draughts on the territory of Belarus. Accession to the UNCCD will in parallel contribute to better coordination of efforts between governmental and non-governmental organizations on national, regional and local levels, in the field of awareness-raising, informing of the public, elaboration and implementation of the action program to combat land degradation.

Strategic goals, tasks, basic principles, and main priorities for development of Belarus in the first decade of the new century, have been defined in: the National Strategy of Sustainable Development of the Republic of Belarus passed by the Government in March 1997; the Main Directions for Social and Economic Development of the Republic of Belarus up to 2010; and the Program of Social and Economic Development of the Republic of Belarus for 2001-2005, approved by the President of the Republic of Belarus.

The outmost priority for the Republic of Belarus is a transition to sustainable development ensuring a balanced resolution of social-economic and ecological problems on the basis of rational use of nature resources in order to meet the demands of the present and future generations.

This goal can be attained through implementation of a number of national objectives, such as maintenance of life quality and quality of environment, overcoming the economic crisis, introduction of rational nature use into industry and agriculture, elimination of the consequences of the Chernobyl accident, improvement of the system of environmental education, more active involvement of the general public into environmental conservation activities, increased international cooperation in the area.

Practical activities to implement the strategic directions in the area of nature conservation for sustainable development of Belarus are listed in the National Action Plan on Rational Use of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus for 2001-2005, passed by the Government in June 2001. Alongside with priority conservation activities, this document defines organizational, economic, legal, and other mechanisms to prevent and/or reduce the negative impacts on natural environment, including on land resources. In particular, the following priority steps were defined: introduction of an integrated approach to land use planning; establishment of legal, economic, organizational and technological mechanisms for introduction of ecologically safe landscape-adaptive models of farming under changing climate and continued land degradation. Optimization of the land composition is a key element in the area of soil protection, i.e. withdrawal of low-production and ecologically unstable lands from agriculture and changing their functional role; revision of farming and amelioration methods for peat soils; compulsory anti-erosion slope protection, rehabilitation of degraded lands. In order to contribute to conservation of biological and landscape diversity in Belarus the Government is planning to increase forest plantations on those lands that can no longer be used in agriculture, as well as on low-production lands. The plan is also to expand the practice of protective forest plantations.

Establishment of new protected areas, their linking into an ecological network and its subsequent integration into the all-European ecological network is an important national objective, alongside with conservation of typical and unique landscapes, as well as operationalization of the National Red Data Book of Belarus.

The Republic of Belarus has a well-developed legal system in the area of land conservation and rational use. This is made up of the Land Code of the Republic of Belarus (1999), Earth Riches Code (1997), Water Code (1998), Forest Code (2000), the Law of the Republic of Belarus on Legal Status of Areas which Suffered from Radioactive Contamination as a Result of Chernobyl Accident (1999), the Law of the Republic of Belarus on Special Protected Natural Areas (1994, 2000), the Law of the Republic of Belarus on State Ecological Examination (2000), the Law of the Republic of Belarus on Protection of the Ozone Layer (2001), etc. Conservation of lands and soils is listed in the national and sectoral programs, strategies and action plans (National Strategy of Sustainable Development, National Action Plan for Rational Use of Natural Resources and Environment Protection in the Republic of Belarus for 2001-2005, National Program for Conservation and Use of Drained Areas for 2000-2005, National Strategy and Action Plan for Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity, Strategic Action Plan for Forestry Development in 1997-2015 in the Republic of Belarus, etc.). The efficiency of their implementation is barred by limited and disproportionately allocated funding, as well as lack of coordination between various programs, strategies, action plans.

The State Program on Conservation and Rational Use of Lands, which was a key national program relevant to the implementation of the UNCCD, was limited in timeframe to 1995-2000, and as of 2002 was completed. Therefore, elaboration and implementation of a National Action Program to Combat Land Degradation will become one of the key elements of sustainable development of the Republic of Belarus. It will strengthen the efforts of national and local authorities, as well as NGOs, to combat land degradation. So far, elaboration of the Program has been fully supported by the public, authorities, and the non-governmental sector.

The Republic of Belarus became a party to the UNCCD on 27 November 2001. The Decree of the Council of Ministers of Belarus #1230 dated 16 August 2001 designates the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus as the leading state focal center coordinating implementation of the UNCCD. Scientific backup for the Convention shall be rendered by the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

A regular interagency task force was established in December 2001 under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection to consider various aspects of implementation of the UNCCD in a timely and coordinated manner. The task force includes representatives of government agencies, non-governmental and scientific organizations, which are involved in various aspects related to the UNCCD.

The UNCCD obligations in Belarus will be implemented through a Plan of activities, developed in consultations with relevant state and non-governmental agencies. Plan of activities includes 44 paragraphs and consists of 5 sections: institutional measures; scientific support; departmental measures;

information resources and monitoring; public relations. It was approved by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus. When the Plan of activities was discussed, all stakeholders were unanimous about the need for elaboration of a National Action Program to Combat Land Degradation, and this was reflected accordingly in the first point on the list of activities. By now we have already embarked on elaboration of similar region plans.

The following measures were identified by the government and non-governmental stakeholders as priority actions to be implemented under the future National Action Program to Combat Land Degradation:

- Improvement of legislation in the area of land ownership and use, as well as in the area of land conservation;
- Elaboration and implementation of economic and financial mechanisms to stimulate rational use and conservation of land resources;
- Setting up a data bank and an information system on land degradation issues;
- Implementation of a remote control system over natural and anthropogenic factors and processes impacting land degradation;
- Elaboration of national and regional sectoral action plans for anti-erosion and forest plantation activities;
- Involvement of general public, and specifically youth NGOs and local people into initiatives to combat land degradation;
- Increasing the level of public awareness of land degradation;
- Coordination of activities under UN environmental conventions to achieve increasing synergies;
- Establishment of specialized monitoring on degraded lands;
- More active cooperation with international agencies and developed countries-Parties to the UNCCD to obtain increasing technical, methodological and financial support;
- Wide presentation of the issues in media.

The Republic of Belarus has just started elaboration of the NAP, for which a number of workshops have been planned, as well as a national forum for priority setting for NAP, and a number of other activities. Technical, methodological, and financial support to these activities from the UNCCD Secretariat, other international organizations and developed countries-Parties to the UNCCD would contribute substantially to the efficiency and pace of these activities in Belarus.

The main internal sources of funding in Belarus are national and local budgets, extra-budget funds, equity capital of enterprises and agencies, people's savings. The main external sources are loans from international agencies, bilateral loans and credit lines, direct foreign investment, transfers in the form of humanitarian aid, etc.

The key role in funding for sustainable development in Belarus is played by the state budget. In 1996-2001, environmental expenditures (including nature conservation fund) were 0.6% of GDP. At the same time the amount of resources allocated for the elimination of the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster has been decreasing: in 1990 this was about 25% of the credit (expenditure) account of the state budget, while in 1995 – 7.3%, in 2001 – 5.3%. A special “emergency tax” was introduced in 1992 specifically to collect funding for this purpose. Over the last several years, it was lowered several times: enterprises suffer from the extremely high cumulative tax deductions, which leads to their lower competitiveness, while the load of funding for recuperation of the Chernobyl-affected areas every year becomes an ever heavier burden for Belarus, which today is almost the only one to bear all of the Chernobyl costs.

The Government of Belarus attaches large importance to the international cooperation and participation of foreign partners in implementation of projects in the area of environment conservation and rational nature-use. Belarus feels high responsibility for construction of international partnerships in the field of environment conservation, particularly after the country was elected into the Board of Directors of UNEP at the 52nd Session of the UN General Assembly, for a period of 1998-2002. Belarus is a Party to 10 environmental Conventions, of which the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change are most relevant to implementation of the UNCCD.

Very urgent and practically important for Belarus is the objective of ecological rehabilitation of peatlands which degraded as a result of drainage of peat soils. This can take the form of re-waterlogging of the degraded areas in order to decrease greenhouse gas emissions, restore the organic layer, conserve biological and landscape diversity.

Elaboration of the NAP will promote a closer cooperation with various international organizations and developed countries-Parties to the UNCCD, in the area of consultations, sharing of knowledge and experience on combating land degradation, as well as training of national experts in this field.

Signing of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters by Belarus has opened new prospects for wider involvement of the general public into the planning and implementation of the country's environmental policies. The non-governmental sector and local people play an extremely important role in making decisions on the process of implementation of the UNCCD.

In July 2001, after preliminary consultations with NGOs, a Public Coordination Council was established under the National Coordinating Body as a step towards implementation of the Aarhus Convention and improved coordination between the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental

Protection and the NGO sector. The Council is made up of representatives of 16 organizations, including Ecoline, Ecopravo, Ecodom, Belarusian Nature Conservation Society, Belarusian Association of Children and Youth, Belarusian Social-Ecological Union “Chernobyl”, Belarusian Ecological Green Party, etc. In March 2002, the Ministry was presented as a National Coordinating Body for the UNCCD in front of the Public Coordination Council. Ways for wider participation of NGOs in current and planned activities under the UNCCD in Belarus were discussed.

All information resources on nature use and conservation available in Belarus will be used for implementation of the UNCCD. This is more than 25 information systems, data bases and banks, as well as 10 cadasters of natural resources.

A web-site of the National Coordinating Body is planned to be established in order to better provide information to stakeholders. The site will be dedicated to land resources, their condition, on-going and planned national and regional activities, as well as investment projects and project proposals in the related fields.