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Draft Environmental Policy Gets Approval

By Roland Oliphant

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Environmental considerations could become central to the government's decision-making process under a new policy approved by the Cabinet on Thursday.

The proposals are included in a draft document outlining "state policy in the field of Russia's environmental development up to 2030."

The document was drafted by a committee, including representatives of business, government officials and NGOs, based on priorities set by President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010.

The text of the document has not yet been made public, although the government and the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry have promised to publish it online.

"In general it's not a bad document," said Yekaterina Khmeleva, coordinator of WWF Russia's environmental law program, who contributed to the draft.

It has several political and economic mechanisms that have never been tried in Russia before — for example enshrining the use of environmental indicators and environmental risk assessment in government decision-making and a series of measures for developing "market instruments" for environmental protection.

But she warned that the final version will have to include concrete objectives and real indicators by which progress can be measured to avoid the fate of the "decorative but essentially useless" 2002 environmental doctrine.

The new document is a series of proposals that will eventually form separate pieces of legislation regulating environmental damage, marine conservation and economic incentives to businesses to reduce their environmental impact, according to a statement posted on the government website after the meeting.

The government is expected to develop a package of measures, based on the report's recommendations, by Dec. 1.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called for a "healthy balance" between environmental and economic interests at the Cabinet meeting Thursday, and hailed the "general cleanup" of the Arctic — an operation to remove Cold War-era military debris — as an example of the government's green commitment.

The U.S. Commercial Service identified energy efficiency and green construction as new leading sectors for U.S. exports and investment in Russia this year, in a sign that demand for clean technology in the country is picking up.

Illegal garbage dumps and landfill sites on the routes of roads that are under construction are hindering development of the country's transportation network, state highway company Avtodor said, Interfax reported.

Avtodor chairman Sergei Kelbakh said Wednesday that an illegal landfill site on the route of the Moscow to St. Petersburg highway through Khimki Forest would cost 300 million rubles ($10 million) to remove, not counting the costs of decontaminating the land.

"We're road builders — we don't have expertise in clearing up dumps," he told reporters.

He called for regional authorities to shoulder the cleanup costs.

The Natural Resources and Environment Ministry said in statement Thursday that it had identified more than 21,000 illegal dumps across the country.

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