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Medvedev Signs Off on Ecology Policy

By Roland Oliphant

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Environmentalists applauded the policy but cautioned that it offers little detail, even though it promises much. **Igor Tabakov**

Activists, journalists and private citizens could find it easier to access information about the environmental records of businesses and government agencies under a new policy approved by outgoing President Medvedev.

Freedom of information is one proposal laid out in a 2,900-word environmental policy document published Monday on the Kremlin website.

"Principles of state policy on environmental development in the Russian Federation in the period up to 2030" for the first time identifies "global environmental problems associated with climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification and other negative environmental processes" as having an impact on Russian national interests.

The report also singles out poor water treatment, degradation of agricultural soil and increasing volumes of waste as major challenges facing the country.

Proposals in the wide-ranging document include promoting "environmentally oriented economic growth," slashing pollution from industry to levels "of other developed countries" and making environmental education a key part of schools' curriculum.

Businesses may face compulsory environmental impact assessments for new developments, phased introduction of a system of an environmental audit system and a ban on unsorted garbage.

The document offers no estimate of the costs of the transition to higher standards, but says such projects will be financed from federal and regional budgets, as well as public-private partnerships.

Environmentalists have applauded the sentiments, but warned that though the strategy promises much, it offers little detail.

"We welcome any documents that help to create a system to support the environment," said Vladimir Chuprov, director of Greenpeace Russia's energy program. "Unfortunately, the document is quite empty — there are some very proper statements but no concrete steps outlined on how to achieve it. No ministerial body is named to oversee it, for example — it is entirely written in the passive voice."

Chuprov did welcome the commitment to include environmental issues in new national educational standards — one thing he says should be one of the strategy's top priorities.

But he said he was disappointed that despite references to environmentally friendly growth, there was no mention of transitioning to a low-carbon economy, or more details about the creation of institutions to properly regulate environmental affairs.

Residents of the Marino, Kozhukhovo and Kapotnya districts are breathing the most polluted air in Moscow, according to research by City Hall's department of natural resource use and environmental protection, Interfax reported Wednesday.

An investigation into a flurry of complaints about unpleasant smells from the Moscow oil refinery in Kapotnya, and the Kuryanovsky and Lyuberetsky water treatment plants in Marino and Kozhukhovo showed unusually high levels of hydrogen sulfide, the research showed.

Department officials said they hoped to develop a plan to reduce air pollution at all three facilities by the end of 2012.

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