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On 21 June 2013 the first meeting of the high-level Steering Committee of the National Policy Dialogue (NPD) on water was held in Astana, Kazakhstan. At the meeting, it was agreed to form an expert group to initiate an analysis into the benefits of joining the Protocol on Water and Health to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes — a first considered step towards accession.

The meeting was opened by Mr. Yerlan Nysanbayev, Vice-Minister of Environmental Protection of Kazakhstan, followed by welcoming addresses from representatives of the Delegation of the European Union, UNECE and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The first Steering Committee meeting was attended by over 30 representatives of a broad range of stakeholders, including relevant ministries and international donors.

Discussions at the meeting focused in particular on the issue of the usefulness of Kazakhstan's accession to the Protocol on Water and Health. Most participants underlined the need for and value of joining this international legal instrument in order to enhance coordination between relevant national authorities and to get access to the knowledge gathered by other countries. As a result, it was decided that a national expert group would be formed with the support of UNECE to study the potential impacts of becoming a party to the Protocol on Water and Health. First results of the expert group's work are expected to be issued in late 2013.

Water-related issues and transboundary cooperation on water resources management are among top priorities for Kazakhstan, which faces serious threats to its water resources from pollution, growing demand and dwindling resources, in part owing to climate change impacts and to competing demand from other countries. In this context, it is important to underscore that Kazakhstan is one of the two riparians of the Aral Sea (with Uzbekistan), and thus knows first-hand the consequences of one of the worst water-related ecological disasters, and also that half of Kazakhstan's water supply comes from transboundary sources, which makes international cooperation key in protecting and managing its resources.

Note for Editors:

NPDs on IWRM and Water Supply and Sanitation (WSS) are the main operational instrument of the European Union Water Initiative (EUWI) Component for Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. UNECE is the strategic partner for support to the policy dialogue processes on IWRM.

NPDs are under way in the following countries of the region: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Ukraine. More information is available at: http://www.unece.org/env/water/npd.