Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of OECD, where I am responsible for Sustainable Development, I would like to join others in welcoming this initiative which we see as one of the most important to be addressed at this Conference. From a pan-European perspective, the environmental challenges in the EECCA region are among the most challenging. The EECCA Environment Strategy is an important means for focussing attention on those challenges and promoting partnerships to address them. In so doing, it shows again how environmental cooperation can be an important driver for regional integration and for promoting peace and security.

At the last “Environment for Europe” Conference in Aarhus in 1998, Ministers asked the EAP Task Force to refocus its efforts on to the needs of EECCA countries. Since then, OECD, as the secretariat for the Task Force, has been working intensely in the region. The work is driven by networks of EECCA country representatives and their partners working in three main areas:

First, water supply and sanitation. The Ministerial meeting that we organised in Almaty in 2000 drew attention to the critical condition of water infrastructure in EECCA countries and on the key steps that need to be taken to address it. Our work in this area also directly supports the EU Water Initiative that we will discuss later this morning.

Second, environmental finance. An important element of this work has been involving representatives from Ministries of Economics and Finance in developing practical tools for mainstreaming environment in governmental decision-making.

Third, environmental policy reform. Here the challenge is to support EECCA countries to adapt their environmental management systems to the requirements of market-based, democratic societies, drawing on the experience from OECD countries, and particularly the neighbouring countries of the EU.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the political leadership shown by the co-Chairs of the EAP Task Force since the Almaty Conference: Minister Chkhobadze of Georgia, who is also the Chair of this session; and Mr Verstrynge and his successor, Ms Blanco, both of the European Commission. The co-Chairs and their colleagues in the Task Force Bureau have played a critical role in mobilising additional resources for the Task Force’s work, and for ensuring that the activities resulted in practical outcomes.

The current text of the draft Ministerial Declaration calls for the work of the Task Force to be expanded and for the Task Force to play the leading role in supporting and facilitating implementation of the EECCA Environment Strategy. We appreciate this expression of confidence in the Task Force’s work. I would like to assure you all that OECD stands ready to do all that it can, within the limits of available resources and our mandate, to support EECCA countries and their partners to achieve the objectives of the EECCA Environment Strategy, and to report on progress achieved at your next Conference.