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**Fifth Meeting of the UN Committee of Experts on
Environmental-Economic Accounting
New York, 23-25 June 2010
North Lawn Building, Conference Room E**

OPENING STATEMENT

Peter Harper
Chair UNCEEA

5th Meeting UNCEEA

23 – 25 June 2010

New York

Opening Remarks

Good morning and welcome everyone to this fifth meeting of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting. Thank you for making the time to attend this meeting, which I believe will be critical in taking work on environmental-economic accounting forward. We have a range of issues to discuss and a full agenda, and the decisions that we take during this meeting will have significant implications for future work. I encourage everyone to participate in the discussions as it is important we have a collective view of the way forward. Paul Cheung would normally make an opening statement, but he is otherwise engaged this morning. He is keen to speak to us, though, and he will join us after lunch to give us his thoughts on the Committee's work.

I would like to set the scene by reminding you of the outcome of the discussion on environmental accounting at the UNSC meeting last February. Many countries spoke during the discussion which is an indication of the very strong interest in our work. You will recall that for some time there has been a discussion on the mandate of UNCEEA; this issue has now been resolved with UNSC agreeing on our mandate and governance. The focus of the mandate remains on environmental-economic accounting and also encompasses supporting statistics such as relevant environmental, energy and other statistics that support environmental-economic accounting. Climate change statistics is not explicitly mentioned in the scope of the statistics covered; however UNSC agreed that environmental-economic accounting is an important aspect of the statistical response to policy formulation in this area.

As it has done at previous meetings, the Commission expressed strongly that the priority of the UNCEEA is to finalise the revision of SEEA as an international statistical

standard. The Commission also acknowledged the strong financial support that had been provided by various national and international organisations. This financial support, along with the work of the Committee to date, means that we are on track to deliver a timely result – Volume 1 and parts of Volume 3 by 2012 and Volume 2 and the remainder of Volume 3 by 2013. These time frames are very tight, but with continued effort by the Committee and supporting bodies such as the London Group I am confident that we can meet these.

In recent months, we have appointed an editor who will be responsible for preparing the updated SEEA. I would like to introduce you to Carl Obst who was formerly responsible for National Account at the Australian Bureau of Statistics and who experience in environmental-economic accounting issues. To assist Carl in this work and Editorial Board has been formed. This Board consists of experts from countries represented on the Bureau as well as experts from international organisations. The Board has already met by teleconference.

Reflecting the priority on SEEA much of the agenda for our meeting is devoted to discussing where we are at and establishing the direction forward. Because of the tight timetable, the remainder of 2010 will be critical for reaching resolution on issues to deal with Volume 1, including undertaking appropriate consultation with all UN member countries and I am counting on Committee members to actively support and participate in this process. We need UNSC endorsement of the recommendations on the issues at its February 2011 meeting if we are to meet the 2012 timetable, and much needs to be done to achieve this.

Work on Volume 2, which I believe will be critical to the future success of environmental accounting, has commenced and I'd like to thank the World Bank and the European Environment Agency for talking leadership on the this work. Important decisions around the scope and nature of Volume 2 will need to be taken and the discussion during this meeting will be vital in shaping these decisions. The issue of valuation, which has been controversial in the past and remains so, is also important and we will have the opportunity to discuss this also.

It is critical to the success of SEEA that it is seen as relevant by policy makers and other users. In this regard, Volume 3 will play a strong role. Good progress has been made on considering the policy issues that might be covered in Volume 3 and preparing relevant material, much of which we will be discussing during our meeting. It is also important that the strong linkages be established between SEEA and other environmental analysis. During the meeting we will be talking about National Footprint Accounts and Genuine Savings and Wealth Accounts and how they relate to the SEEA framework.

On this issue of the policy relevance of SEEA, I am concerned that the benefits of environmental accounting to policy formulation are not as well understood as they might. Without this understanding, there may be reluctance by countries to make investments into environmental accounting, which will have clearly have implication for the take-up of SEEA and its subordinate standards such as SEEA-water and SEEA-energy. Clearly, the actual development of the standards, and particularly the development of Volume 3 will facilitate this understanding. But this alone will not be sufficient. We have an important promotion and advocacy role to play both at the international and national levels to explain the benefits of environmental accounting and I urge UNCEEA members to be very active in this. I would also welcome feedback on other ways in which we can improve the take-up of environmental accounting.

As you may be aware, the UNSC meeting agreed to update the Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics (FDES) and an Expert Group has been established to undertake this work. This Group will be chaired by Statistics Canada – I believe the Chief Statistician has agreed to undertake the role which underscores the importance of this work. The FDES and SEEA are complementary; much of the source data on which SEEA depends will come from the FDES. The Expert Group will maintain close cooperation with UNCEEA to ensure that the two work streams proceed smoothly in parallel to maximise synergies and avoid duplication. We will have an opportunity to discuss the FDES and its relationship to environmental-economic accounting during our meeting.

Energy statistics are a vital building block of SEEA, and SEEA-energy in particular and there has been good progress in developing these statistics, particularly in the development of the International Recommendations for Energy Statistics and we will be able to discuss these in our meeting.

The work of UNCEEA is supported and complemented by the work of international organisations and other task forces and similar bodies. It is important that we have a good understanding of this work so it can be coordinated with ours. Our meeting will conclude with a discussion of the UNCEEA work program and we will be informed of the work of groups working under the auspices or in collaboration with UNCEEA.

We have a busy three days ahead of us, with many interesting and challenging issues to discuss. I am confident that we will have a great meeting and that through our discussions the work of this Committee will be significantly advanced, particularly in regard to SEEA, our number one priority.

Thank you.

Peter Harper
23 June 2010