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**Regional Environmental Center (REC) for Central and Eastern Europe
25th Anniversary Ministerial**

Regions for a Sustainable Future

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It is an honor and a pleasure for me to be here today on behalf of the United States Government and the American people in celebration of the Regional Environmental Center's 25th Anniversary. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you along with the other REC Founders on this important occasion.

The United States is proud to be one of the Founders and to have supported the REC's mission and its ongoing work in Central and Eastern Europe during the previous twenty-five years. As a representative of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, I am especially honored that the White House and the United States Congress entrusted the EPA as a partner with many of you in turning the vision of the REC into reality.

I am very pleased that former EPA Administrator Reilly, who represented the United States at the REC's opening in 1990, is with us here today. Before I continue, I would like to invite Mr. Reilly to share a letter from former President George H. W. Bush, whose strong commitment to the REC continues to this day.

There's a saying by the British poet, Lord Alfred Tennyson, that I believe embodies the historic vision that we collectively embarked upon twenty five years ago: "For I dipped into the future, far as the human eye could see; saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be."

When former U.S. President George H. W. Bush visited Budapest in July 1989, it was a different world. The environmental challenges were daunting, the new democracies were in their infancy, and the pervasive innovative technologies upon which we all rely today were largely non-existent.

But the feelings of opportunity and hope were almost limitless. And the REC was well-positioned to build on this wave of optimism and help to facilitate the important and historic transitions that lay ahead for the region.

There are many countries and individuals here today who can be proud of their contributions to the success that the REC has enjoyed over the past 25 years.

Whether it is capacity building or sustainable development through local action, the REC and the nations represented here today have all played a leading role in facilitating solutions and engaging stakeholders on critical issues facing our environment.

Because anniversaries provide a chance to reflect on the road traveled as well as the road ahead, I would like to highlight two efforts that are particularly important to the United States and which, I think, are instructive for the REC's future.

When EPA first began working with the REC on Local Environmental Action Programs -- or "LEAPs" -- back in the 1990s, we knew that encouraging communities to set their own environmental priorities through an open, participatory process was the right approach. What we didn't anticipate is that the approach would resonate so strongly that it would still be implemented -- and in fact would be expanding -- more than a decade after EPA's initial support concluded.

We are very grateful that other donors have continued to support LEAP implementation through the REC. In fact, today the U.S. Government, with funding support from the State Department, is collaborating with the Netherlands and Norway through the REC to implement local environmental and energy action plans in municipalities in Ukraine.

We are proud to stand with the people of Ukraine and to partner with our allies in helping to support their aspirations for a more sustainable future within the Euro-Atlantic family.

More recently, EPA is pleased to support and fund the CRESSIDA project which engages local communities along the Drini and Drina River watersheds in the Western Balkans. As many of you know, these watersheds represent a complex, transboundary system, connecting communities across six different countries.

This complexity means that coordination and multi-sectoral collaboration will be paramount to ensure sustainable management of this entire system. As such, technical assistance, training and practical tools provided through the REC will be leveraged within and among these communities to foster both local and regional opportunities.

While still in the early stages of implementation, this effort recognizes that partnerships and collaboration among multiple sectors and disciplines, at various levels, are fundamental in achieving long-term solutions.

We all have come a long way together, and the REC is a true reflection of what we can accomplish and the impact we can make through strong partnerships and meaningful collaboration.

But there is more work to be done.

The nature of environmental and public health protection is changing, and the challenges that we face today transcend geographic and political boundaries. The REC's future success depends directly on the sustained support and ownership that is demonstrated by its member and partner countries. And the REC will thrive if it continues to understand and fulfill the needs of not only its partners, but also the people and communities of Central and Eastern Europe.

Let me close by saying each of us share a common goal and walk a common path. We all share a sense of commitment to the REC and a shared responsibility to promote economic, social and environmental prosperity for this generation, and for future generations to come.

As a famous Chinese scholar, Lao Tzu, once said, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” The REC and its partners in this region have clearly taken many steps in this journey toward creating long-term prosperity. We look forward to continued success in the decades to come. Thank you.