

KOREA

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS*

Environmental conditions in the Republic of Korea should be understood in the context of the country's extremely high population density and the rapid pace of its economic development over the past 25 years: both are the highest in the OECD. In the 1970s and early 1980s rapid industrialisation and urbanisation gave rise to severe environmental degradation. In the 1990s, environmental protection has been given greater emphasis and efforts are being made to render development sustainable.

Korea is now an OECD Member country. Its economy already is the ninth largest in the OECD and is converging towards OECD averages in terms of many indicators. In this period of transition, production and consumption growth are likely to continue generating strong pressures on the environment that are not offset by favourable changes in production and consumption patterns. But Korea's economic growth is also generating the means to achieve environmental convergence very quickly if it implements its policies and programmes with resolve.

The challenge of further improving environmental performance in Korea lies in: i) meeting standards and commitments equivalent to those of other OECD countries; ii) strengthening the integration of environmental concerns in sectoral and economic decision making; and iii) assuming international environmental responsibilities commensurate with its level of economic development.

This OECD report sets out the baseline for assessing future environmental progress, and it examines the environmental performance of Korea: the extent to which government domestic objectives and international commitments are being met. A number of recommendations are put forward that could contribute to further environmental progress in Korea.

1. **Implementing Environmental Policies**

Achievements and further progress

Korea is acting vigorously to solve environmental problems neglected in the early decades of its remarkable economic development. Almost the entire body of environmental legislation now in use has been adopted or updated over the last six years. Implementation of environmental policies is proceeding progressively and pollution abatement and control expenditure has been steady at 1.5 per cent of GDP. The country is being equipped with environmental infrastructure; regulatory and economic instruments are in use; local government plays an increasing role in implementing policies; and environmental information and public participation are increasingly called upon. The 1995 Green Vision 21 document recognises the considerable efforts needed to rehabilitate Korea's environment, and provides an ambitious schedule for reinforced environmental protection in an expected context of high economic growth and pressures on the environment.

Korea's regulatory system is characterised by a combination of generally applicable rules and a "place-based" approach where necessitated by intense development pressures or a vulnerable environment; the main instruments are emission/discharge permits, ambient environmental standards and the designation of zones where special conditions apply. A formal enforcement programme is in place with inspections, fines and indictments. A number of the standards and limits have been tightened gradually over recent years; this process needs to continue, as for certain standards there still is some distance to go before they are equivalent to those in other OECD countries. The changes being made to the permitting system go in the right direction, and the introduction of integrated pollution control for water and air permits would be a logical next step.

Korea has been creative in adding an array of economic instruments to its set of regulatory instruments; these include emission charges, environmental quality improvement charges, traffic congestion charges, energy taxes, a deposit-refund system and a waste management charge. Revenue from such instruments accounted for about 13 per cent of the Ministry of Environment budget in 1994 and is on the increase. However, the rates at which economic instruments have been applied are still too low to significantly affect behaviour, as shown, for example, by the low rate of recycling resulting from waste deposit-refund programmes.

* Conclusions and Recommendations approved by the Group on Environmental Performance at its April 1997 meeting.

Korea has a tradition of strong central government. Local government, however, spends 83 per cent of overall public environmental expenditure (including pollution abatement and control expenditure), or about 1 per cent of GDP, and recently greater environmental decision making power has been devolved to local level. This process is not yet functioning as well as it should; local governments need to build up expertise in implementing and enforcing environmental protection measures to tackle, for example, compliance problems involving smaller factories and enterprises.

Korean industry has benefited from the Government's export-oriented policies, including relatively lenient environmental constraints. The latter are now gradually being tightened, and the more progressive exporting industries are adopting environmental management systems and applying them to their subsidiaries worldwide. The experience of these large enterprises should be shared with small and medium-sized industries, often subcontractors to the large firms, which still lack the required awareness and know-how.

The Government recognises the contribution a well-informed citizenry can make to protecting the environment. A good beginning has been made concerning the provision of environmental information to stakeholders in environmental management, but much more could be done so that relevant information becomes available in a way that assists NGOs and citizen groups to play their proper democratic role and that allows consumers to make the right choices. A full scale pollutant release and transfer register should be established. Studies on the short- and long-term health and environmental effects of pollution should be carried out, and their results made generally available.

It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals:

- implement environmental policies with determination and along the lines already defined;
- pursue current efforts to bring the environmental infrastructure to the desired level;
- continue gradually tightening environmental standards and discharge/emission limits;
- continue improving the effectiveness of economic instruments, including raising the rates at which they are applied;
- strengthen the capacity of local government to carry out its new environmental functions;
- strengthen the role of industry associations in raising environmental awareness, expertise and management standards among small and medium-sized firms;
- give the public access to environmental information to encourage well-informed debate on environmental issues, exceptions to this general principle being limited to defined circumstances; educate consumers regarding the health and environmental effects of current production and consumption practices.

Water management

Over the last 30 years, Korea has built an extensive system of dams, reservoirs and other hydraulic works that now supplies water for agriculture, industry and households and protects industrial and urban areas from devastating floods; implementation of the latest stage of this programme, the 1990 Long-Term Water Resource Management Master Plan, is on target. Over the last 20 years, construction of municipal sewerage networks and waste water treatment plants has progressed and the country is on the way to closing the gap with other OECD Member countries. A serious effort has been made over the last decade to bring industrial discharges under control, and enforcement of permit conditions has improved. In the 1990s, Korea has adopted an up-to-date body of water legislation providing some of the tools for integrated quantity and quality management of the resource. Several of the 1997 interim targets of Green Vision 21 are likely to be achieved, such as the population connection rates for piped water supply (86 per cent) and for sewage treatment (55 per cent).

However, strong pressures on Korean water resources from very dense settlement and fast growing economic production lead to many problems with ambient quality for rivers, lakes and coastal waters. The 1997 target of 42 per cent of rivers meeting class I or II standards is far from being achieved. Eutrophication of lakes and reservoirs poses problems for aquatic biota and for water supply intakes. While a good start has been made in guaranteeing minimum flows in rivers, more emphasis needs to be given to the needs of aquatic ecosystems. Operational standards at smaller sewage and waste water treatment plants are not always adequate to meet effluent limits. Lack of awareness and know-how prevents smaller industries from achieving a satisfactory standard of environmental performance. Enforcement needs to be strengthened further. The financial effort to upgrade sewerage and waste water treatment infrastructure needs to be stepped up if both the Green Vision objective of an 80 per cent connection rate in 2005 and more stringent planned effluent limits are to be satisfied. Proposals to further adjust the

water pricing and charging regime need to be implemented to encourage water conservation. The fragmentation of water management responsibilities and the vertical structure of the institutions involved make it difficult to establish a culture of joint problem solving that would integrate quantity, quality and ecological management of water bodies.

It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals:

- establish a system of comprehensive river basin planning, taking account of water quantity and quality issues as well as land use and ecological aspects, and involving stakeholders at an early stage;
- further pursue measures to establish a correct water pricing regime and consider giving a greater role to the private sector in the provision of water services;
- ensure the protection of groundwater aquifers against contamination and examine how the use of good quality groundwater can be limited to purposes necessitating such quality;
- institute quality assurance systems at waste water treatment plants to ensure high operational effectiveness at plants of all sizes, and pursue efforts to find long-term solutions for the treatment of sewage sludge;
- ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises comply with effluent standards, through effective monitoring, enforcement and appropriate transfer of environmental awareness and know-how.

Air management

Korea has in the 1990s managed to slightly decrease emissions of SO₂ and total suspended particulates (TSP) and achieved substantial declines in CO and hydrocarbon emissions, while NO_x emissions have risen, against a background of rapid economic growth. Not apparent from this list is that emissions from heating have been cut very substantially, while emissions of conventional pollutants from industry, transport and energy generation have risen or been stable. Relative progress has largely been achieved through energy policies (with a change in the fuel mix towards nuclear power and liquefied natural gas) and through environmental policies resulting in increased supply of low-sulphur, low-lead fuels and implementation of regulations. Ambient air quality in the major metropolitan areas has improved over the last decade as average annual concentrations of SO_x and particulates have tended downward. Current national standards for the annual average values of most pollutants are generally met. Air quality standards and emission limits are gradually being tightened and brought into line with those of other OECD countries. The 1990 Air Quality Preservation Act provides the basis for an effective air management policy and a gradual strengthening of standards, including focused action on designated air preservation zones.

Nevertheless, Korea faces a difficult challenge in implementing its air management policies and in containing its air emissions with local, regional and global impact. Ambient air quality in the big cities frequently does not comply with national or WHO standards for the 24, 8 or 1 hour averages and generates public health concerns relating to ozone, NO_x and PM₁₀. Only limited attention has been paid to controlling hazardous air pollutants. The level of SO_x emissions per unit of GDP is among the highest in the OECD. Korea has yet to achieve major decoupling of SO_x, NO_x and TSP pollution from economic growth. CO₂ emissions have closely followed GDP growth, and their level per unit of GDP is close to the OECD average. According to IEA sources, CO₂ emissions are projected to be 80 per cent higher in 2000 than in 1990. Energy prices do not always reflect full costs. While some use has been made of economic instruments, there is much room to enlarge their role, for example by pursuing the plan to transform Environmental Improvement Charges into true pollution fees fully consistent with the polluter pays principle. Continuing expansion of industrial production and the growth of traffic are powerful driving forces pushing up emissions; the question arises whether existing measures, along with those indicated in Green Vision 21, will be able to meet the challenge of improving air quality in Korean cities and contributing significantly to international efforts to master regional and global environmental effects of air pollution.

It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals:

- pursue the measures already announced in Green Vision 21 and place more emphasis on control of hazardous air pollutants;
- set health-based air quality standards for the metropolitan areas in line with international practice, and follow up with concrete implementation plans and timetables;
- improve the air management capability of local government, and make municipalities and counties effective in enforcing emission permits and responsible for reporting air quality and emission data to the public and the Government;
- extend the use of economic instruments as a tool for improving air quality;
- implement measures to adjust energy prices in order to promote energy conservation;

- set further energy conservation objectives, including targets and deadlines for the major energy using sectors, in particular for energy-intensive industries;
- further pursue an energy supply policy integrating environmental concerns fully, and further reduce the sulphur content of heavy oil and diesel fuel;
- give full attention to preventing industrial accidents and being prepared to respond to such accidents if they do occur by implementing procedures recommended at international level.

Waste management

Korea has elaborated and implemented a very comprehensive waste management policy during the early 1990s and has adopted a comprehensive waste management plan with ambitious targets for disposal and recycling. It has set up a detailed institutional structure and has organised full devolution of waste management to local authorities. Generation of household waste is decreasing as a result of technological changes and the use of a new economic instrument (taxation of garbage collection bags). A smaller portion of waste is being sent to landfills and a larger share is being recycled. Economic incentives (deposit-refund systems and waste disposal charges) are in place to promote recycling of certain products. They have proved very successful for certain types of products. New large landfills are better controlled and cause less pollution than their predecessors. A growing number of incinerators are put into operation each year. Transboundary movements of waste are now carefully checked.

While waste management has generally kept pace with economic development, there are still serious difficulties to overcome and large investments to be made if waste is to be safely managed in Korea. Basic data concerning waste disposal and its effects on the environment are not yet fully available. Expenditure to rehabilitate polluted soil is as yet only in the planning stage. Most landfills do not meet technical standards in force and some need serious remediation work. Most landfills cannot accept much new waste because they are nearly full. Many incinerators are planned but few built, and difficulties exist with public opinion concerning emission of pollutants. In 1995, people living near disposal facilities acquired rights to compensation for the facilities' negative effects, but payment has yet to be made in many places. Generation of industrial waste is growing more rapidly than GDP. Treatment plants for hazardous waste are rare and need to be built. In many cases economic instruments do not meet their aim, partly because charges are too low. Subsidies are being provided to overcome the lack of producer responsibility and difficulties in creating a stable recycling industry. While the polluter pays principle is considered fully applicable in the area of waste management, much remains to be done to reduce provision of financial aid by the central Government.

It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals:

- better monitor generation of domestic and industrial waste so as to observe results of waste management policies and detect emerging problems;
- increase the level of investment in waste management, in particular to build incinerators;
- increase rates of the deposit-refund system and the waste treatment charge to reduce waste generation and to cover disposal costs;
- improve the level of technology performance in relation to integrated waste policy management, in areas including: leachate treatment and gas recovery in landfills and prevention of hazardous waste contamination; use of efficient composting technologies; equipment of incinerators with efficient processes for minimising pollutant emission and converting waste to energy; and development of recycling technologies;
- reduce food waste production, decrease the water content of such waste and improve enforcement of laws on food waste;
- alleviate public concern near waste disposal facilities by adopting stricter emission standards, improving monitoring of emissions and paying adequate compensation; reduce government subsidisation of recycling by shifting greater responsibility to producers and creating adequate economic incentives to reduce waste generation;
- speed up remediation of contaminated soil.

Nature conservation

Korea has established most of the legislative framework needed for nature protection and is stepping up implementation efforts. The replanting of the country's forests following the depletion and degradation caused by decades of overharvesting and the destruction of war is the most remarkable achievement among Korean efforts

towards the protection of nature; nearly 65 per cent of the country's land area is again covered in trees. A large part of the land territory of Korea, and some marine areas, are under some form of protection. In the first half of the 1990s, a beginning was made to give sensitive habitats a high level of protection. Fees supplement public financing of nature protection in designated areas. Korea acceded to CITES in 1993 and ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1994. The concept of ecological networks was introduced in 1995.

Nevertheless, rapid economic development continues to put strong pressures on nature, including pollution from agriculture, industry and municipalities, affecting aquatic ecosystems; pressures from recreational demands on protected areas; indiscriminate use of some natural resources; and reclamation of land or destruction of sensitive ecosystems like wetlands and tidal flats. Korea has begun to move towards modern nature conservation but still lacks scientific information to formulate well-focused policies. For protected areas, the degree of protection is relatively low. More ecological corridors need to be created to overcome fragmentation of natural areas. Other than designating species at risk as protected, little appears to have been done in the way of more proactive species protection measures, such as recovery programmes. Illegal hunting and overfishing of some species occur. The institutional capacity for nature conservation still appears limited; the fragmentation of responsibilities at national level reduces the effectiveness of policy formulation and implementation. There is increasing concern that some of Korea's semi-natural forest will be transformed into plantation forest.

It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals:

- urgently adopt and implement a national biodiversity strategy;
- extend the areas benefiting from a high degree of protection, in accordance with the objectives of Green Vision 21, including wetlands and coastal areas; outside protected areas, strengthen existing efforts to take greater account of landscape values;
- place more emphasis on species protection measures, such as protection of habitats, creation of further ecological corridors connecting protected habitats, more stringent measures against illegal hunting and trading in products of endangered species, and species recovery programmes;
- take further measures to reduce visitor impact on natural areas and to more fully preserve protected areas from construction of recreation and tourist facilities;
- rationalise the institutional responsibilities for nature conservation and develop partnerships with all relevant stakeholders for ecosystem management;
- strengthen the scientific basis for nature protection;
- further integrate environmental concerns in forestry, agricultural and fishery policies and ensure that forestry, agricultural and fishing practices evolve towards a sustainable and environmentally conscious approach.

2. Integrating Environmental and Economic Decisions

Integration of environmental concerns in economic policies

After a long period of rapid economic growth, Korea has in the first half of the 1990s put in place environmental institutions and legislation, and taken a number of measures that have begun to contain some of the pressures on the environment. Notwithstanding average economic growth rates of 8 per cent per year, some progress is being made, but as yet there is no broad improvement of actual environmental quality. Moreover, certain indicators suggest that some pressures are growing faster than GDP; for example, energy supply and road traffic elasticity are 1.3 and 1.7, respectively, higher than the level of many OECD countries.

Korea's rapid economic and institutional transformations add to the environmental challenge it is facing. If Korea, as a newly developed country, wants to fully benefit from a win-win situation where problems are prevented rather than remedied, it will be necessary to better integrate environmental concerns in economic and sectoral policies.

Public and private pollution abatement and control expenditure is estimated to have remained fairly constant in 1992-95 at 1.5 per cent of GDP, but grew by almost 30 per cent in real terms. About half of this expenditure is public, and of that share more than 90 per cent is accounted for by local government. Almost 70 per cent of the expenditure by business is in the manufacturing sector. This expenditure does not appear to have affected the overall international competitiveness of Korean industry, and in fact has permitted the emergence of a Korean eco-industry.

The two main strategic environmental planning documents, the “Presidential Vision for Environmental Welfare” and Green Vision 21, provide clear and ambitious perspectives and a number of environmental and quantitative objectives. They will help rally the efforts of a relatively large number of government agencies with environmental responsibilities. However, the traditionally vertical structure of Korean public administration makes it difficult to formulate and implement integrated environmental policies: official co-ordination procedures do not always work well, and a culture of joint problem solving needs to be developed. Notably, the fragmentation of responsibilities for nature protection hinders the adoption of an ecosystem approach, and the separation of water quantity and quality management cannot promote integrated management of the resource.

Integration of environmental concerns in economic and sectoral policies is still in its early stages. The current five-year economic development plan contains some energy conservation and efficiency measures, and some sectoral plans pay attention to environmental concerns. But more systematic efforts should be made to introduce environmental concerns in strategies for changes in the industry, energy and transport sectors, and a review is needed of sectoral support measures that are harmful to the environment.

The use of the EIA process should be expanded as a mechanism for integrating environmental concerns in decisions and designs for sectoral projects (e.g. transport, energy, agricultural, recreational and environmental projects) and as a means of associating various stakeholders and ensuring public consultation and participation.

The expected growth and changing pattern of consumption are likely to lead to significant increases in water use, waste generation and demand for transport and recreational facilities. Measures to render consumption more environmentally friendly, such as those already initiated concerning eco-labelling and the greening of government operations, or simply to help in getting the prices of national resources right, will need to be strongly implemented to counteract the growth in environmental pressures that will result from these trends.

It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals:

- maintain a strong commitment of all sectors in the implementation of Green Vision 21 and other environmental and sectoral plans;
- develop efforts and new approaches to integrate environmental concerns into policies formulated in the different administrations, and in the practices of the relevant economic sectors; in particular, strengthen integration with regard to the energy, transport and agriculture sectors and in fiscal policies; give specific attention to environmentally harmful subsidies and fiscal deductions;
- develop new approaches to involving major stakeholders in participating in strategic environmental planning and the definition of concrete targets and deadlines;
- extend EIA procedures to better integrate environmental concerns in sectoral projects and programmes;
- expand the use of public consultation procedures and engage all interested parties early in the deliberations on public projects or major permitting decisions;
- strengthen the liability legislation in order to better compensate for damage to the environment in line with the polluter pays principle.

Sectoral integration: transport

Vehicle use causes significant air pollution and other environmental problems. Trucks and buses are the source of two-thirds of the transport-related air emissions in Korea. In Seoul about 77 per cent of the air pollution comes from motor vehicle exhaust. Gradual tightening of the technical regulations for vehicles has resulted in a fleet that meets relatively low emission standards and by 2000 will meet standards comparable to those of Japan and the United States. Stringency of inspection regulations guarantees that vehicles in use perform well environmentally. Fuel quality has been improved significantly with lower-sulfur diesel fuel and generalised use of unleaded gasoline. An extensive fleet of LNG taxis is in use and cars powered by unconventional fuels are being developed. An innovative programme to introduce lower-emission vehicles using alternative fuels is expected to result in a gradually increasing share for these vehicles after 2000. Some economic instruments are being applied to discourage the use of private cars.

The progress achieved so far has enabled the transport system to fulfil its purpose without excessive disturbance of the environment. Nevertheless, the situation in terms of pollution and congestion is worsening. NO_x and ozone levels are increasing in large cities; volatile organic compounds are not yet controlled. The average speed of traffic in many cities is decreasing and the economic cost of congestion is growing. It is expected that the success

of measures taken so far will be more than offset by the volume increase of car and truck use. In spite of considerable efforts to create a modern transport infrastructure, road and rail capacity remain insufficient to accommodate demand effectively. The decreasing prices of fuel, especially diesel fuel, have helped the development of the road transport sector. In light of the expected further increase of transport demand, the Government is formulating a new national infrastructure plan for the period to 2011. It will contain measures to extend road capacity, promote multimodal freight transport and public transport and discourage private car use. Price incentives to support this policy have been or will be implemented. Concerns on CO₂ emissions have not been integrated in transport policies. Further efforts concerning transport demand management and achieving a better modal balance, taking into account environmental and congestion externalities, are needed. For such a policy to succeed, more comprehensive transport planning is essential, with integration of environmental concerns in transport policy.

It is recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals:

- develop comprehensive transport planning, integrating environmental concerns and specifying quantitative targets for transport related pollution levels;
- continue to promote development and use of less polluting vehicles; strengthen measures to reduce emissions from trucks and other diesel vehicles;
- expand the involvement of the public and of environmental NGOs and the use of EIA in defining and implementing transport policies and infrastructure projects;
- continue to develop freight transport modes less harmful to the environment;
- expand the use of economic instruments, such as fuel taxation, parking fees and road pricing, to reduce vehicle traffic;
- pursue integration of transport policies and land use policies to link public transport and activities requiring mobility.

3. International Co-operation

Most of Korea's international environmental co-operation activities have been initiated during the 1990s, after the country had reached a sufficiently high level of economic development and the Government was ready to support a new vision for environmental protection that went beyond addressing local issues. While its progress in defining policies is impressive, there are relatively few international agreements against which its environmental performance can be judged.

Korea has been most successful, first, in promoting a series of bilateral and regional agreements aimed at addressing emerging environmental issues and at establishing a scientific basis on which to build mutual trust and understanding. Second, it has ratified many international agreements, reported on the progress achieved towards their implementation and met all its international commitments. It has also taken up environmental obligations arising from its new membership in the OECD and has undertaken many activities to provide follow-up to commitments arising from UNCED; in particular, it has adopted a national Agenda 21 action plan and promoted similar activities at local level. Third, Korea has decided to address issues related to the sea in an integrated way by creating a single ministry for all matters concerning the marine environment, marine resources and marine shipping. Stringent new measures concerning oil tanker safety have been taken to avert oil spills. Fourth, institutions have been set up to provide development aid to developing countries. Fifth, significant restrictive measures on trade have been introduced concerning protection of endangered species and movements of hazardous waste.

However, in a number of international environmental areas, progress still is needed, particularly since solving global environmental issues requires involvement by all countries according to their economic capabilities. Concerning climate change, Korea has not yet developed a strategy and policy to reflect adequately its new economic position as well as the rapid growth forecast for the years to come. Concerning the ozone layer, Korea has announced its plan to cease both production and use of CFCs before 2005. Concerning acid precipitation, in the absence of internationally agreed emission targets for SO_x and NO_x, Korea stabilised SO_x emissions over 1990-94, but emissions are projected to increase unless additional measures are taken. Concerning marine waters, it has not yet set limits for total nitrogen or phosphorus releases even though red tides are increasing in frequency. Concerning oil spill preparedness and response, the investments it has made for clean-up are still inadequate to deal with a medium-sized oil spill; furthermore, in the area of coastal zone management, many new far-reaching initiatives will be required. The rapid development of nuclear energy in Korea has to be accompanied by an adequate liability and compensation regime. Concerning official development assistance, Korea is providing 0.03 per cent of GNP as ODA but should draw up a schedule to increase its aid to reach the OECD-DAC average. In all these areas, there would be merit in integrating more closely the declared objectives of Korean environmental diplomacy with the industrial, economic

and financial objectives and capabilities of the country, to improve Korea's image as a trade partner carrying out its fair share of common responsibilities on global and international environmental issues.

It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to the following proposals:

- seek to improve support by the Korean public for international co-operation activities;
- continue efforts towards ratification and implementation of international agreements and OECD legal instruments, and publicise periodic reviews of actions taken to implement international environmental commitments;
- increase the means available to deal with international environmental issues and to meet Korea's new international role;
- develop international policies reflecting OECD membership, taking into account Korea's high rate of economic growth;
- develop a balanced and scheduled strategy concerning climate change issues;
- tackle marine pollution problems arising in the Yellow and South Seas, starting with pollution in Korean waters and eutrophication of shallow coastal waters;
- strengthen oil pollution prevention, preparedness and response and the compensation regime for oil pollution damage, on the basis of the polluter pays principle;
- join ongoing international efforts to strengthen the liability and compensation regime for nuclear damage;
- expand aid to developing countries and the environmental component thereof, in line with Korea's economic development.

