

Press Release No. 27/2009

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For a world free of hazardous chemicals Federal Environment Agency applauds progress in international chemicals safety

Two government congresses held this month made considerable progress in matters of international chemicals safety. The Conference of the Parties to the Stockholm Convention and the Second International Conference on Chemicals Management took place in short succession so as to lend the decisions reached at them even more weight. This represents one big step made toward achieving mitigation or elimination of the harmful effects caused to mankind and the environment by chemicals by 2020, as was resolved by the world community at the Rio Summit in 2002. On the occasion of the Conference of Parties in Geneva, the Stockholm Convention—also known as the POPs Convention—has added nine more persistent chemicals which accumulate in the food chain, or POPs (persistent organic pollutants), to the original “dirty dozen” list. The Convention entered into force in May 2004 and initially regulated twelve POPs, including PCB, DDT or polychlorinated dioxins and furans. These substances are present in a range of plant protection agents and industrial chemicals, or may appear as unwanted by-products in production and combustion processes. The list now features 21 chemicals. “The expanded list of internationally outlawed chemicals makes a decisive step towards creating a world without overly hazardous chemicals. Strict compliance monitoring must now follow the success of negotiations in Geneva”, commented Dr. Thomas Holzmann, Vice President of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA).

The resolution adopted at the Fourth Conference of Parties in Geneva in early May concerns substances that were in use on the market in Europe up until recently before the conference. They include brominated flame retardants (pentabromodiphenyl ether and octabromodiphenyl ether) and perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS), which has many applications such as fire extinguishing foam and in the textile industry. Save for a few exceptions, these substances may no longer be manufactured or used in future. In cases where their application is indispensable or for which there are no available substitutes, action plans are meant to put a speedy end to such uses.

The global community decided back in 2002 to mitigate the hazardous effects of chemicals on mankind and the environment by 2020. The insecticide DDT, which is still in use to combat malaria in many countries, is due to be banned permanently by 2020. A comprehensive aid programme to phase out its use without a further spread of malaria will assist those countries that can not do without this highly toxic chemical at present.

The Second International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM 2) resolved action plans that promote tackling urgent environmental and health problems posed by chemicals on a voluntary basis. Hazardous chemicals in non-regulated products and waste electronics as well as paints containing lead in consumer goods such as toys were among the key topics on which the delegates agreed there must be improved exchange of information and joint action programmes between industrialised and developing countries. International experts also discussed nanomaterials with a view to their many opportunities and risks for the environment and mankind. The community of nations would like to assume joint responsibility and use of the development of nanomaterials.

The new work packages call upon industrialised and developing countries alike to pursue the path to safe international chemicals management. "Hazardous chemicals pose a risk to the environment and health. They spread quickly through the air and water and are traded globally. Chemicals safety is therefore just as much a global issue as is their trade", said Holzmann.

More information on international chemicals management is here:

http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien/mysql_medien.php?anfrage=Kennummer&Suchwort=3529
<http://www.saicm.org>
<http://chm.pops.int/>

Dessau-Roßlau, 27 May 2009