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Fluorinated fire-fighting foams protect – not the environment though

Federal Environment Agency, Fire Protection Association and fire departments publish flyer on ecological application

Fire departments save lives, recover, extinguish, protect– sometimes the environment, too. Fires can be fought especially well with chemicals, propellants or plastics that contain fluorinated extinguishing foams, which prevent the formation of toxic combustion products. However, the chemicals contained in the foams are not, environmentally speaking, worry-free. “Fluorinated chemicals are very persistent and are spread across the globe via bodies of water. Some of the products in this substance group are disposed to accumulating in the body and exert toxic effect. We must therefore prevent their input to the environment, although it is evident that this may not be entirely avoidable in the fire-fighting scenario, as the protection of human lives is, of course, highest priority”, said Dr. Klaus Günter Steinhäuser, Head of the Chemical Safety Unit at the Federal Environment Agency (UBA). A new flyer offers fire brigades and operators of fire extinguishers systems practical advice on choice of suitable extinguishing agents and how best to dispose of polluted extinguisher water.

The flyer developed jointly by the Federal Environment Agency (UBA), German Fire Protection Association (DFV) and Federal Association of Technical Fire Protection (bvfa) has been published just in time for Interschutz 2010 in Leipzig (international trade fair for rescue, fire prevention, disaster relief, safety and civil security sectors). Interschutz, which attracts more than 1,000 exhibitors and over 100,000 visitors, is the largest fair of its kind and is organised by the bvfa. Parallel to the exhibition, the 28th Deutsche Feuerwehrtag (German Fire Services Day) will take place from 7-12 June 2010, which is why one main focus of the fair is on firefighting.

Background: Fluorinated extinguishing foams

Back in 2000 the 3M company, one of the major producers of fluorinated extinguishing foams at the time, discovered that their workforce had high concentrations of the chemical PFOS (Perfluorooctanesulfonic acid) in their blood. 3M took this as its cue to discontinue production and forfeit its position as market leader. Environmental authorities around the world took action, and today PFOS is on the list of so-called Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). POPs are very hazardous chemicals that are global pollutants and which the signatory states of the Stockholm Convention, an international treaty on persistent organic pollutants, aims to eliminate or restrict the production and use of.

Up to that time PFOS had been the main fluorine ingredient in fire-fighting foams. The stocks of PFOS-based fire-fighting foams at the plant fire brigades of the chemicals industry and airports were full. Some fire departments still have these PFOS-based extinguishers in stock today. There has been a ban in the EU on the marketing and use of PFOS since 27 June 2008; however, an extension on the use of already produced (and stored) fire extinguishers with PFOS is in effect until June 2011.

The new guidebook (in German) Fluorhaltige Schaumlöschmittel umweltschonend verwenden [Ecological application of fluorine-based fire-fighting foams] is available for free download here: <http://bit.ly/93sCRU>. A print version is also available free of charge from the same address.

Dessau-Roßlau, 10 June 2010