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Put out the fire, please—without the poison though

Grace period for environmentally harmful fire extinguishing foams ends in June 2011

The grace period for application of PFOS-based fire extinguishing foams ends on 27 June 2011. PFOS, or perfluorooctanesulfonic acid, is an extremely persistent chemical. This acid accumulates in organisms and is toxic. PFOS was used for many years in fire extinguishing foams and was thereby introduced into the environment. The chemical can be traced in every ecosystem, even in remote regions such as the Arctic and the animals that inhabit it. "The persistence of PFOS in human blood and breast milk is of particular concern", said UBA President Jochen Flasbarth. Fire departments, chemical companies and airports ought to move to dispose of any equipment in stock appropriately, ideally in concert with the environmental authorities. New PFOS-free extinguishing foams must also be used in an environmentally friendly way.

The EU ban on the use of PFOS in fire extinguishing agents takes effect on 28 June 2011, ending the grace period that started throughout the EU in 2006. In the meantime the signatory states to the Stockholm Convention have taken it up on the POPs (Persistent Organic Pollutants) List and thus signaled its phase-out worldwide.

PFOS is one of the per- and polyfluorinated chemical compounds, also known as PFCs. Due to their high level of stability and unique properties—both water and oil resistant—they have many applications, e.g. in the paper, leather and textile industries as well as in fire extinguishing foams. PFCs can also contaminate ground- and potable water supplies. They spread through soil, water and air and can be absorbed by plants and animals. It is a matter of serious concern that PFCs can now be found throughout the world. The highest concentrations have been measured in animal life in the Arctic, most notably in polar bears.

As a result of the ban on PFOS, a range of new extinguishing foams is now available on the market. However, foams that are PFOS-free may instead contain other PFCs. These substitutes are also either non-degradable or degrade to form stable PFCs, which is why UBA believes they are cause for equal concern. UBA recommends application of PFC-based fire extinguishing foams exclusively to extinguish burning liquids in tank storage facilities and to equip such installations with a system that collects the extinguishing water. The latter is the only means of

environmentally friendly disposal of the extinguishing agents. UBA recommends that PFC-based extinguishers not be used in fire drills.

For more important information about PFC-based extinguishers:
<http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/produkte/pfc/index.htm>.

The guide on environmentally friendly use of fluorinated foam extinguishers, Fluorhaltige Schaumlöschenmittel umweltschonend verwenden (in German only), can be downloaded at <http://bit.ly/93sCRU> or ordered free of charge.

Dessau-Roßlau, 5 May 2011