United Nations Environment Programme
برنامج الأمم المتحدة للبيئة · 联合国环境规划署
PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT · PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ
UNEP

PRESS RELEASE

Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) to enter into force on 17 May 2004

Geneva/Nairobi, 18 February 2004 – The 2001 Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) will become legally binding on 17 May 2004, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) announced today.

The 90-day countdown to the treaty's entry into force was triggered on 17 February 2004 when France became the 50th state to ratify the agreement.

"Of all the pollutants released into the environment every year by human activity, POPs are the most dangerous. For decades these highly toxic chemicals have killed and injured people and wildlife by inducing cancer and damaging the nervous, reproductive and immune systems. They have also caused uncounted birth defects," said UNEP Executive Klaus Toepfer.

"By committing governments to eliminating production and environmental releases of these chemicals, the Stockholm Convention will greatly benefit human health and the environment. It will also strengthen the overall scope and effectiveness of international environmental law," he said.

Governments will pursue a rapid start to action under the treaty when they meet for the first session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention (COP 1) in Punta del Este, Uruguay in early 2005.

One of this meeting's priorities will be to assist countries to combat malaria by replacing DDT with the increasingly safe and effective alternatives. The COP will also establish a Committee for evaluating other chemicals and pesticides that could be added to the initial target list of 12 POPs (these are aldrin, chlordane, DDT, dieldrin, endrin, heptachlor, mirex, toxaphene, polychlorinated biphenols or PCBs, hexachlorobenzene, dioxins and furans) from a wide range of industrial and other sources.

Still another key goal for the COP will be to finalize guidelines for promoting "best environmental practices" and "best available techniques" that can reduce or eliminate releases of dioxins and furans (perhaps the most toxic of all the POPs).

Every human in the world carries traces of these chemicals in their bodies. POPs are highly stable compounds that can last for years or decades before breaking down. They circulate globally through a process known as the "grasshopper effect". POPs released in one part of the world can, through a repeated process of evaporation and deposit, be transported through the atmosphere to regions far away from the original source.

In addition, POPs concentrate in living organisms through another process called bioaccumulation. Though not soluble in water, POPs are readily absorbed in fatty tissue, where concentrations can become magnified by up to 70,000 times the background levels. Fish, predatory birds, mammals, and humans are high up the food chain and so absorb the greatest concentrations. And when they travel, the POPs travel with them.

As a result of these two processes, the Inuit and the animals they consume in the Arctic -- thousands of kilometers from any major POPs source – suffer particularly high levels of POPs in their bodies. But POPs are equally dangerous to people working with pesticides or living near POPs sources, particularly in developing countries, where a lack of equipment and expertise leads to accidental exposures.

Most of the 12 chemicals will be banned immediately. However, the use of DDT for disease vector control under World Health Organization guidelines is considered an acceptable purpose because it is still essential in many countries to control malaria transmission by mosquitoes. This will permit governments to protect their citizens from malaria – a major killer in many tropical regions – until they are able to replace DDT with chemical and non-chemical alternatives that are cost-effective and environmentally friendly. So, contrary to some claims, no one will die of malaria because of the Stockholm Convention. In fact, the Convention should help direct research and development towards more effective means of malaria control.

In addition to banning uses, the treaty focuses on cleaning up the growing accumulation of unwanted and obsolete stockpiles of pesticides and toxic chemicals. Dump sites and toxic drums from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s are now decaying and leaching chemicals into the soil and poisoning water resources, wildlife, and people.

In the case of PCBs, although they are no longer produced, hundreds of thousands of tons are still in use in electrical transformers and other equipment. Governments have until 2025 to phase out these uses, which gives them time to arrange for PCB-free replacements. Not later than 2028, governments must dispose of these PCBs in an environmentally sound manner.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to POPs. The problem is often that high costs, a lack of public awareness, and the absence of appropriate infrastructure and technology have often prevented their adoption. Solutions must be tailored to the specific properties and uses of each chemical, as well as to each country's climatic and socio-economic conditions.

To ensure that such solutions are exploited, donors have pledged to contribute hundreds of millions of dollars in new funding over the next several years. The Global Environment Facility is the principal entity of the interim financial mechanism of the treaty. It has already mobilized resources to support POPs projects in more than 100 countries. Backed by an alliance of developed and developing countries – and with both industry and environmental groups on board – the Stockholm Convention holds the promise of a POPs-free world for future generations.

Note to journalists: For additional information, please contact Eric Falt, Spokesperson/Director of UNEP's Division of Communications and Public Information, on Tel: +254 20 623292, Mobile: +254 (0) 733 682656, E-mail: eric.falt@unep.org; Nick Nuttall, UNEP Head of Media, on Tel: +254 20 623084, Mobile: +254 733 632755, E-mail: nick.nuttall@unep.org; or Michael Williams in Geneva at +41-22-917 8242, +41-79-409 1528 (cell) or michael.williams@unep.ch. See also www.pops.int.