

POPs-International Action To Address Dioxins And Furans

PROGRESS IN DEVELOPING A UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON PERSISTENT ORGANIC POLLUTANTS (POPs)

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Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) are organic compounds of natural or anthropogenic origin that resist photolytic, chemical and biological degradation. They are characterized by low water solubility and high lipid solubility, resulting in bioaccumulation in fatty tissues of living organisms. POPs are transported in the environment in low concentrations by movement of fresh and marine waters and they are semi-volatile, enabling them to move long distances in the atmosphere, resulting in wide-spread distribution across the earth, including regions where they have never been used. Thus, both humans and environmental organisms are exposed to POPs around the world, in many cases for extended periods of time.

Over the past several years, the risks posed by POPs have become of increasing concern in many countries, resulting in actions to protect human health and the environment being taken or proposed at the national, regional and international levels. At the request of UNEP Governing Council (May 1995), an assessment was conducted of twelve POPs (PCBs, dioxins, furans, aldrin, dieldrin, DDT, endrin, chlordane, hexachlorobenzene, mirex, toxaphene and heptachlor) by an international multistakeholder working group that included representatives from intergovernmental organizations, governments, industry, public interest groups and scientific organizations from around the world. The working group developed a report and recommendations which were unanimously supported by all parties and submitted to the UNEP Governing Council and the World Health Assembly (WHA, the policy body for the World Health Organisation) for consideration at their respective 1997 meetings.

The report and its recommendations were approved by both UNEP and WHA who concluded that:

- (a) sufficient information was available on the chemistry, toxicology, transport pathways, origin, transport and deposition of the 12 POPs to demonstrate the need for immediate international action on the 12 POPs and to provide a basis for moving forward on realistic response strategies;
- (b) immediate international action should be initiated to protect human health and the environment through measures which will reduce and/or eliminate the emissions and discharges of the 12 POPs and, where appropriate, eliminate production and subsequently the remaining use of those POPs that are intentionally produced;
- (c) proposed action programs must take into account that the 12 specified POPs include pesticides, industrial chemicals, and unintentionally produced by-products and contaminants, and that, within the framework of overarching objectives to be negotiated by an intergovernmental negotiating committee (INC), different approaches are needed for each category of POPs; and
- (d) a process will be required to develop science-based criteria and a procedure for identifying POPs, in addition to the 12 already specified, as candidates for future international action.

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UNEP has convened, together with WHO and other relevant international organizations, an INC with a mandate to prepare, preferably by the year 2000, an international legally binding instrument for implementing international action, initially beginning with the 12 specified POPs. The INC has met twice (June 29 - July 3, 1998; January 25 - 29, 1999) and will meet from September 6 - 11, 1999. A report will be made of the most recent progress in the negotiations, with emphasis on the developing policies for dioxins and furans, and related POPs.