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130 Nations Will Eliminate World's 12 Worst Pesticides & Industrial Chemicals

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Governments Meet to Eliminate 12 Persistent Organic Pollutants

PUNTA DEL ESTE, Uruguay, May 2, 2005 (ENS) - The Conrad Resort and Casino in Punta del Este is full of government officials from 130 countries this week, but they are not here to play - they are here to work on ridding the world of some of the most dangerous chemicals ever created. The officials represent countries that are Parties to a new international treaty that will eventually eliminate 12 named toxic chemicals that are persistent in the environment, lasting for years or decades before degrading into less dangerous forms.

The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), which entered into force on May 17, 2004, targets 12 hazardous pesticides and industrial chemicals that can kill people, damage the nervous and immune systems, cause cancer and reproductive disorders, and interfere with normal infant and child development.

Every human in the world carries traces of POPs in his or her body.

"The Stockholm Convention will save lives and protect the natural environment - particularly in the poorest communities and countries," said Executive Director Klaus Toepfer of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), under whose auspices the Convention was adopted.

"Eliminating POPs," said Toepfer, "will cost billions of dollars and require countries to adopt new methods and technologies to replace these toxic substances. The hard work has only just begun."

The 12 POPs covered by the Convention include nine pesticides - aldrin, chlordane, DDT, dieldrin, endrin, heptachlor, hexachlorobenzene, mirex and toxaphene. Two industrial chemicals are covered - PCBs as well as hexachlorobenzene, also used as a pesticide. And finally, the Convention covers dioxins and furans, unintentional by-products of manufacturing.

One of the conference's key tasks is to establish a process for evaluating candidate chemicals that could be added to this initial list.

While the risk level varies among the targeted chemicals, they all share four properties - they are highly toxic, they are stable and persistent, they evaporate and travel long distances through the air and through water, and they accumulate in the fatty tissue of humans and wildlife.

POPs circulate globally through a process known as the grasshopper effect. POPs released in one part of the world can be transported through the atmosphere to regions far away from the original source through a repeated process of evaporation and deposit.

There are alternatives to POPs, but the problem has been that high costs, a lack of public awareness, and the absence of necessary infrastructure and technology have often prevented their adoption. Solutions must be tailored to the specific properties and uses of each chemical and to each country's climatic and socio-economic conditions.

By signalling to governments and industry that these chemicals have no future while respecting their legitimate short-term concerns, said Toepfer, the Convention aims to stimulate the development of new, affordable and effective alternatives to the world's most dangerous POPs.

The delegates to this First Conference of the Parties to the Stockholm Convention will address four main challenges:

- Minimizing and eliminating releases of dioxins and furans. Reducing these unwanted by-products of combustion and industrial processes will require expensive and innovative new technologies and processes. It will also involve educating people not to burn garbage and other materials in open fires. In Punta del Este, officials will consider a new set of Guidelines on Best Available Techniques and Environmental Practices for preventing or reducing the formation of dioxins and furans.
- Phasing out DDT without undermining the fight against malaria. Until safe, affordable and effective alternatives are in place, governments can continue using DDT to protect their citizens from malaria. The mosquito borne disease affects some 500 million persons every year. Ninety percent of those who die are in Africa, mostly children. Malaria alone leads to a loss of \$12 billion a year in Africa's gross domestic product. The conference will evaluate the continued need for DDT and consider next steps.
- Developing alternatives for combating termites. These tiny pests cause billions of dollars in economic damage and are particularly difficult to control. The meeting will consider procedures for handling future requests

by governments for exemptions enabling them to continue using three POPs termiticides. It will also evaluate initiatives to reduce and eliminate completely the need for these chemicals.

- Cleaning up old PCBs from aging and widely dispersed equipment. PCBs have been used in electrical transformers and other equipment for decades. They must be eliminated and replaced over the next 20 years. Most developing countries, however, currently lack the facilities, funds and expertise to do so.

The conference will also consider adopting or endorsing the guidelines on managing POPs wastes that were adopted last year by the Basel Convention on Transboundary Movements of Hazardous and Other Wastes.

Still another task is to provide guidance to the Global Environment Facility, which serves as the financial mechanism that funds national projects and activities for implementing the Convention.

At the conference, new funding was announced to help clean up dangerous obsolete pesticide stockpiles throughout Africa. The Africa Stockpiles Programme (ASP) - a partnership of governments, intergovernmental agencies, multinational banks, and large environmental groups - today announced that the African Development Bank will provide \$10 million and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency will provide US\$3 million toward the cleanup.

The ASP's goal is to raise \$250 million and use the funds to clear an estimated 50,000 metric tons of obsolete pesticides in an environmentally sound manner, and to put in place measures to prevent their recurrence. The program will also deal with tens of thousands of tons of contaminated soil and wastes that have accumulated in stockpiles throughout the African continent.

Birama Sidibe, regional director for rural development with the African Development Bank, said, "We consider the ASP to be a flagship initiative, which will bring substantial public health and environmental benefits to the continent, while strengthening the agricultural sector."

Ian Johnson, World Bank vice president for sustainable development, said, "The ASP is going to make a tangible difference to the people of Africa and to their - and the global - environment. Ridding Africa of its stocks of obsolete pesticides requires an unusual level of cooperation and commitment among partners representing widely differing perspectives, but all sharing the same vision of solving a real, immediate problem with

global consequences - and of doing it together.”

Through its Development Grant Facility, the World Bank has contributed US\$2.7 million for a two year period through 2006.

An initial \$46 million committed by the partnership will be used to prepare programs and to clean up seven African countries - Ethiopia, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Tunisia - as well as prepare nine more for cleanup. Implementation of the program will begin in early fall of this year.

The partnership is also concerned about South America, where there are about 10,000 metric tons of obsolete pesticides – up to 20 percent of which are considered to be persistent organic pollutants. Many of the pesticides derive from cotton where toxaphene was widely used.

Officials from the U.S. State Department, led by Claudia McMurray, deputy assistant secretary for environment, are attending the conference, along with staff members from the U.S. Congress and representatives from the U.S. Departments of Commerce and Agriculture and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

McMurray said in July 2004 testimony before the U.S. Congress that the Stockholm Convention includes a "flexible system" of financial and technical assistance through which developed countries will help less developed countries meet their obligations in managing the dangerous materials. McMurray said that as of 2004, the United States had spent over \$20 million assisting several developing countries in dealing with these materials.

The Global Environment Facility has published a series of Fact Sheets on POPs, available online:
http://www.gefweb.org/Projects/focal_areas/pops/pops_publications.html