
Committee on Trade and Environment

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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE SECRETARIAT OF THE UN/ECE CONVENTION
ON LONG-RANGE TRANSBOUNDARY AIR POLLUTION PERSISTENT
ORGANIC POLLUTANTS**

The attached background paper¹ has been received from the Secretariat of the UN/ECE Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPS). It is being circulated to Members of the CTE in preparation for the Information Session with Secretariats of Multilateral Environmental Agreements on 23 July 1998.

Comité du commerce et de l'environnement

**COMMUNICATION DU SECRÉTARIAT DE LA COMMISSION ÉCONOMIQUE POUR
L'EUROPE, ORGANE EXÉCUTIF DE LA CONVENTION SUR LA POLLUTION
ATMOSPHÉRIQUE TRANSFRONTIÈRES À LONGUE DISTANCE, RELATIVE
AUX POLLUANTS ORGANIQUES PERSISTANTS**

La note d'information ci-jointe¹ relative aux polluants organiques persistants a été reçue du Secrétariat de la Commission économique pour l'Europe, organe exécutif de la Convention sur la pollution atmosphérique transfrontières à longue distance. Elle est distribuée aux membres du Comité du commerce et de l'environnement en vue de la séance d'information avec les Secrétariats des Accords environnementaux multilatéraux qui aura lieu le 23 juillet 1998.

Comité de Comercio y Medio Ambiente

**COMUNICACIÓN DE LA SECRETARÍA DE LA COMISIÓN ECONÓMICA PARA
EUROPA, ÓRGANO EJECUTIVO DE LA CONVENCION SOBRE LA
CONTAMINACIÓN ATMOSFÉRICA TRANSFRONTERIZA A LARGA
DISTANCIA, RELATIVA A LOS CONTAMINANTES
ORGÁNICOS PERSISTENTES**

La Secretaría de la Comisión Económica para Europa, Órgano Ejecutivo de la Convención sobre la Contaminación Atmosférica Transfronteriza a Larga Distancia, ha enviado el documento de base adjunto¹, relativo a los contaminantes orgánicos persistentes, que se distribuye a los miembros del CCMA como parte de los preparativos para la reunión de información con las Secretarías de Acuerdos Multilaterales sobre el Medio Ambiente, que se celebrará el 23 de julio de 1998.

¹ English only/En anglais seulement/En inglés solamente.

THE PROTOCOL TO THE 1979 UNECE CONVENTION ON LONG-RANGE TRANSBOUNDARY AIR POLLUTION PERSISTENT ORGANIC POLLUTANTS

Note prepared by the secretariat to the United Nations
Economic Commission for Europe²

The 1979 Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution was concluded under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE) and is serviced by its Secretariat in Geneva. Seven Protocols have so far been added to it: one on international cost-sharing for monitoring and modelling, two on the control of sulphur emissions, one on nitrogen oxides, one on volatile organic compounds, and, most recently, one on heavy metals and one on persistent organic pollutants. The two latest Protocols were adopted at a Special Session of the Executive Body for the Convention at Ministerial level, in Aarhus (Denmark) on 24 June 1998 and signed by 34 Parties to the Convention. They will enter into force when sixteen Parties have ratified them.

Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) are known to be a threat to human health and to cause damage to the environment. High concentrations of POPs have long been associated with a number of carcinogenic and other health effects. In recent years, however, there has been growing evidence that POPs can have much more subtle effects even at very low concentrations. POPs are thought to cause birth defects and reduce male sperm counts. They may also have a detrimental effect on physical and intellectual development, and damage the immune system. Foetuses and infants are particularly at risk. They can be exposed through the placenta and breast milk.

Human activities are responsible for these problems. For instance, the largest emission sources of some of the POPs are the combustion of fossil fuels, industrial processes, waste incineration and road transport. Other POPs are industrial chemicals and pesticides. Pollution with persistent organic pollutants is an international problem; POPs are transported across national borders through the atmosphere. They can be deposited in remote areas very far away from their emission sources. Some pollutants have, for instance, been detected in the Arctic without those chemicals ever having been used in that part of the world.

The Protocol on Persistent Organic Pollutants focuses on a list of 16 substances, which have been singled out according to certain risk criteria:

Pesticides: aldrin, chlordane, chlordecone, DDT, dieldrin, endrin, heptachlor, hexachlorobenzene (HCB), mirex, toxaphene, hexachlorocyclohexane (HCH) (incl. lindane);

Industrial chemicals: hexabromobiphenyl, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs); and

By-products or contaminants: dioxins, furans, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs).

The ultimate objective is to eliminate any discharges, emissions and losses of POPs. The Protocol bans the production and use of some products outright (aldrin, chlordane, chlordecone, dieldrin, endrin, hexabromobiphenyl, mirex and toxaphene). Others are scheduled for elimination at a later stage (DDT, heptachlor, hexachlorobenzene, PCBs). Finally, the Protocol severely restricts the use of DDT, HCH (including lindane) and PCBs. Limited uses which are thought to be essential and

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for which there are no adequate substitutes, can be exempted. For instance, the use of substances like DDT will be allowed for public health emergencies. The Protocol includes provisions for dealing with the wastes of products that will be banned. It also obliges countries to reduce their emissions of dioxins, furans, PAHs and HCB below their levels in 1990 (or an alternative year between 1985 and 1995). It puts forward best available techniques to cut emissions of these POPs. For the incineration of municipal, hazardous and medical waste, it lays down specific limit values.

The POPs Protocol has been designed to stand the test of time: it foresees the possibility of modifying the list of substances or the range of control and management actions without renegotiating the entire Protocol.

The Protocol will set a framework for legislation on a large number of pollutants for countries in Europe and North America. But it will also have repercussions beyond the UN/ECE region. It is hoped, for instance, that they will help to protect the vulnerable Arctic region, where POPs are accumulating even though there are no sources of emissions nearby. Finally it may be used as a basis for the preparation of a global legally binding instrument on POPs, work on which has been initiated by UNEP.
