



International conference promotes hazardous waste prevention, minimization and recovery

Geneva (5 October 2011) – The member-Governments of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal will meet at the Cartagena de Indias Convention Centre, Cartagena, Colombia, from 17 to 21 October 2011 for the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Basel Convention, hosted by the Government of Colombia.

The Conference is dedicated to the theme “Prevention, minimization and recovery of wastes”.

The Basel Convention is the most comprehensive global environmental treaty dealing with hazardous and other wastes. It has 178 members (Parties) and aims to protect human health and the environment against the adverse effects of the generation, management, transboundary movements and disposal of hazardous and other wastes.

Government representatives in Cartagena will investigate ways in which the Convention could help turn wastes into valuable resources, so as to create business and job opportunities, while protecting human health, livelihood and the environment.

Turning wastes into valuable resources is currently one of the largest unaddressed challenges facing the international waste agenda.

Electronic wastes offer a particularly striking example, as they often contain valuable metals which are currently neither collected for recycling nor entering those recycling streams that are capable of recycling them efficiently. End-of-life recycling rates for precious metals from electronics are estimated to be at or below 15% (UNEP, 2011). Yet 30 obsolete mobile phones contain the same amount of gold as one ton of mined ore, in addition to other valuable metals, including cobalt (in Li-Ion batteries), copper, palladium and silver.

Smelting processes, which separate metals from other materials, may release metal fume and metal oxide particulate, dioxins and furans, exposing workers and downwind communities unless the emissions are controlled. These releases can be controlled through properly engineered processes and emission control systems, but require environmentally sound management, a key pillar of the Basel Convention.

Uncontrolled incineration or land filling of end-of life mobile phones therefore makes neither environmental nor economic sense. Properly managed recovery can extract these metals in ways that protect the environment and human health, while promoting sustainable livelihoods for workers engaged in recovery operations.

The Conference will also look at ways to prevent and minimize wastes, considering it as part of the life cycle of materials, as an essential component of the concept of sustainable production and consumption.

The Conference in Cartagena will consider a new strategic framework to steer development of the Convention during the next decade.

Parties will examine proposals tabled by the Governments of Indonesia and Switzerland for a way forward on the Ban Amendment, which would ban trade in hazardous wastes between Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and developing countries which are party to the Amendment. The proposals are the product of a country-led process that was transparent and invited input from all interested parties and stakeholders.

Trade in hazardous wastes has grown significantly between developing countries, a trend unforeseen when the Convention was adopted more than two decades ago. Such trade is not addressed by the Ban Amendment, which was adopted in 1995 and has 70 Parties. Due to a long-standing dispute over how to calculate the requisite number of ratifications needed which has defied resolution by consensus, the Amendment has yet to enter into force.

In the intervening decades, the quantity of transboundary movements of hazardous wastes has increased. Experts estimate that by 2018 the quantity of e-waste generated in developing countries will exceed the amount generated in OECD countries. A growing share of the international trade in hazardous waste is believed to lie outside of the framework of environmentally sound management.

“Today, the protection of vulnerable countries remains as important as ever. Yet, the picture of trade in wastes has moved on, with transboundary movements of waste between developing countries having become a major factor,” said Jim Willis, Executive Secretary of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions.

Mr. Willis continued, “This conference presents a unique opportunity to position waste management in all countries, and especially in developing ones, as a model area for achieving an environmentally and socially sound economy.”

Note to editors:

The 1989 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal has two pillars. First, it regulates the transboundary movements of hazardous and other wastes. Second, the Convention obliges its Parties to ensure that such wastes are managed and disposed of in an environmentally sound manner. To this end, Parties are required to prevent or minimize the generation of wastes at source, to treat and dispose of wastes as close as possible to their place of generation and to minimize the quantities that are moved across borders. Strong controls have to be applied from the generation of a hazardous waste to its storage, transport, treatment, reuse, recycling, recovery and final disposal.

The Conference of the Parties is the supreme decision-making organ of the Basel Convention. It meets every other year to discuss programmatic and budgetary issues for the next biennium.

The Basel Convention has 14 Regional and Coordinating Centres, with one or more operating on every continent. The Centres develop and undertake regional projects, and deliver training and technology transfer for the implementation of the Convention under the direction of the Conference of the Parties and of the Secretariat of the Convention.

Recent years have seen efforts under the Basel Convention to develop a global strategy for environmentally sound waste management. This included support to the launch of the Partnership for Action on Computing Equipment (PACE), the first of several strategic partnerships in different areas of waste management.

For further information on the recovery of valuable metals from end-of-life electronic products, see *Recycling Rates of Metals – A Status Report*, Appendix E. Review of Precious Metals Recycling Statistics (UNEP, International Resource Panel, 2011).

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Please also consult the web site of the Basel Convention: <http://www.basel.int/>