The Convention in action

The Basel Convention has issued technical guidelines for minimizing, recovering, recycling and safely disposing of many of the toxic substances that threaten water quality, including household wastes, used oils, and organic solvents. It has published a training manual on the destruction and decontamination of PCBs and other POPs. It has also issued guidelines on two waste disposal methods known to release toxic chemicals into the environment.

The Convention's current work focuses on management of POPs as waste, end-of-life mobile phones, wastes from the surface treatment of metals and plastics; dioxins and furans; disposal of PVCs; and household wastes.

The Basel Convention is working in partnership with industry to find safe and innovative solutions for hazardous waste management. These range from finding less toxic substitute chemicals to exploring alternatives for local disposal of waste products, thereby reducing damage to human health and the environment.

Building capacity through Regional Centres

In order to help developing countries and countries with economies in transition in the implementation of the Basel Convention, the Basel Convention Regional Centres were established.

There are currently 12 such Centres, in Argentina, China, Egypt, El Salvador, Indonesia, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Senegal, Slovakia, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay.

Looking ahead

Convention activities in the next few years will focus on implementation of the Strategic Plan which builds on the achievement of the first decade of the Basel Convention and asserts a vision that the ESM of hazardous and other wastes is accessible to all Parties, emphasizing the minimization of such wastes and the active promotion of the transfer and use of cleaner technologies including the partnerships with relevant stakeholders.

Under the Strategic Plan the following will be the priority wastes of concern: electronic wastes, used lead-acid batteries, used oils, obsolete stocks of pesticides, dioxins/furans, dismantling of ships, and biomedical and healthcare wastes.

"Water is life. Keeping it clean requires international commitment to prevent and minimize the discharge of hazardous wastes into the environment. The Basel Convention is proud to embody this commitment."

– Sachiko Kuwabara-Yamamoto,
Executive Secretary,
Basel Convention Secretariat

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What does the Basel Convention mean for WATER?

Basel Convention
on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal

Water at risk

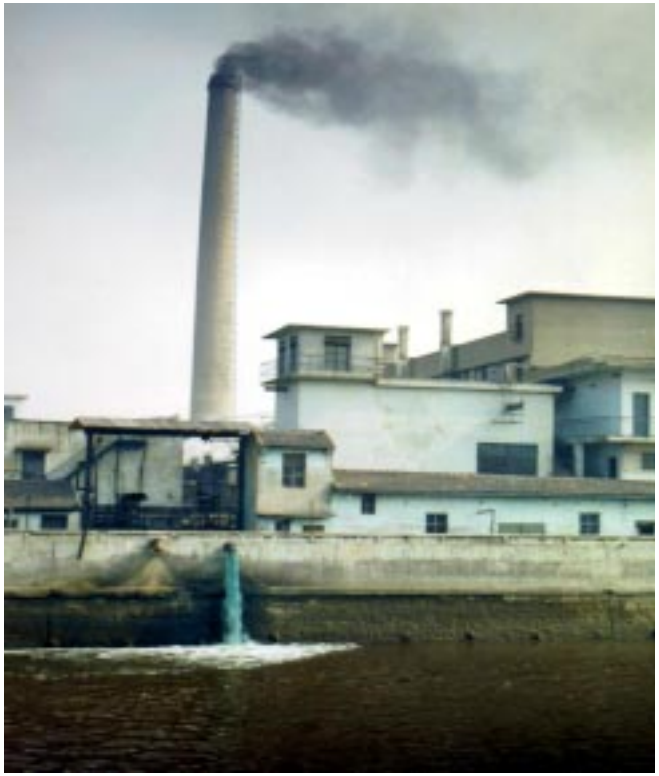
Every year countries produce millions of tonnes of hazardous waste. The most persistent and dangerous substances inevitably find their way into our rivers, lakes, reservoirs and groundwaters. In many countries, it is rare to find a source of fresh water completely free from toxins such as aluminium, arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, iron, lead, manganese, mercury, nickel, silver and zinc, all of which may be toxic to aquatic organisms.

Once hazardous waste reaches bodies of water, treatment of the contaminated water will be very costly or sometimes impossible. The only way to protect the health of people and the environment is to prevent this from happening.

Goals of the Convention

The fundamental goals of the Basel Convention are the reduction of transboundary movements of hazardous and other wastes subject to the Convention; the prevention and minimization of their generation; the environmentally sound management of such wastes; and the active promotion of the transfer and use of cleaner technologies.

The Basel Convention promotes "environmentally sound management" (ESM), the aim of which is to protect human health and the environment by minimizing hazardous waste production whenever possible. ESM means addressing the issue through an "integrated life-cycle approach", which involves control during the production, use and trade of chemicals, including the disposal of hazardous waste.



Of the hazardous wastes covered by the Basel Convention, there are many which particularly threaten water quality. Among them:

Used oils. Oils produced from petroleum are used as fuels, lubricants, insulants and industrial fluids. They are persistent and can spread over large areas of land or water. A quart of used motor oil can pollute a quarter of a million gallons of water.

POPs. Persistent organic pollutants are applied as pesticides, used by industry, or generated as by-products of industrial processes. They include PCBs, dioxins and furans. They are highly stable and can last for years or decades before breaking down. Aquatic organisms are known to accumulate POPs in their fatty tissues. POPs are highly toxic in very low doses, causing death, disease, and birth defects among humans and animals.

Household wastes. Household cleaners, dyes, paints, pesticides, and organic solvents are a significant source of toxic water pollution throughout the world. The problem is most severe in urban areas, where the wastes generated by a single home are multiplied by many millions. The waste water is often deliberately dumped into the nearest river, threatening the health of downstream communities.

Heavy metals. Heavy metals, like mercury, cadmium and copper, are major toxic metals discharged by industries and other sources.

Businesses and individuals generate thousands of used lead-acid batteries annually. If not handled properly, they can leak or spill and contaminate soil and groundwater. Both lead and acid may be harmful to humans and the environment. Discarding lead-acid batteries is wasteful, because their lead provides a valuable source for new batteries.

Carelessly discarded electronic and electrical equipment can leak dangerous chemicals into the environment, including PCBs. For example, there are millions of discarded mobile phones deteriorating in landfills around the world or burning in municipal waste incinerators, releasing the cadmium and nickel in their batteries, lead in their solder and gallium and arsenic in their transistors. Cadmium is a particularly toxic pollutant of waterways.