



United Nations Environment Programme

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ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

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PRESS RELEASE

New guidelines will reduce hazards posed by plastic wastes

Geneva, 18 January 2002 – Experts from some 100 governments meeting here this week have adopted a set of technical guidelines for protecting human health and the environment from the improper management and disposal of plastic wastes.

Prepared under the auspices of the Basel Convention on the Control of the Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, the guidelines respond to growing concern that many developing countries lack the necessary legislation and facilities for coping with the dramatic growth in the quantity of these wastes.

In many of these countries, plastics are disposed of through open, uncontrolled burning and landfilling. Open burning releases pollutants into the air that could cause various health problems.

In addition, the burning of polyvinylchloride (PVC) plastics produces persistent organic pollutants (POPs) known as furans and dioxins. These pollutants circulate globally and have been associated with a number of adverse effects in humans, including immune and enzyme disorders and chloracne, and they are classified as possible human carcinogens.

“Like many industrial products, plastics pose risks to human health and the natural environment that can be reduced through recycling, re-use, and rigorous disposal procedures,” said Executive Director Klaus Toepfer of the United Nations Environment Programme. “These new guidelines demonstrate that the Basel Convention is playing a lead role in promoting environmentally sustainable development.”

Governments will now start using the new guidelines to promote the environmentally sound management of plastic wastes. The guidelines address a range of waste management issues such as sorting for mechanical recycling, health and safety, shipping and transport, feedstock recycling, compaction, energy recovery and final disposal.

Popular since the 1950s, plastics are now a global, multi-billion-dollar industry. In Western Europe alone, some 19,166,000 tonnes of collectable plastic waste was produced in 1999 from post-user sources (i.e. excluding wastes from the manufacturing of plastics). Because they are so chemically stable, plastics can often lie buried for centuries in landfills, many of which are already filled to capacity. In developed countries, approximately three quarters of plastics are landfilled, while the remaining quarter is recycled into new materials or incinerated to produce

useful energy. There is an enormous potential for increasing the amount that is re-used or recycled.

Plastics are an integral part of the modern economy and are used in automobiles and other consumer goods, building, containers, and numerous other products. They often have a very long working lifetime, and end-of-life plastics can often be recycled into a second-life application. If soundly managed, environmental benefits can include reduced material use (such as in packaging) and reduced end-of-life waste. Nevertheless, the production, processing and use of plastics does generate wastes, and much more needs to be done to make our reliance on plastics more environmentally friendly.

The Technical Guidelines for the Identification and Environmentally Sound Management of Plastic Wastes and for their Disposal have been adopted by the Convention's Technical Working Group. They will go forward for final adoption to the sixth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention (COP 6), tentatively scheduled for 9 – 13 December 2002 in Geneva.

The Basel Convention was adopted in March 1989 after a series of notorious "toxic cargoes" from industrialized countries drew public attention to the dumping of hazardous wastes in developing and East European countries. The Convention regulates the movement of these wastes and obliges its members to ensure that such wastes are managed and disposed of in an environmentally sound manner. Governments are expected to minimize the quantities that are transported, to treat and dispose of wastes as close as possible to where they were generated, and to minimize the generation of hazardous waste at source.

Due to different reporting methods in many countries, it is extremely difficult to produce reliable statistics on the generation and cross-border movements of hazardous waste. According to statistics provided by 36 Parties to the Basel Convention, about 200 million metric tonnes of hazardous wastes were generated in their countries in 1999. As of January 2002, 148 countries and the European Community are Parties to the Convention.

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