UN Chemicals Summit Likely to Adopt New Controls

JOHN HEILPRIN, Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — At the start of a major conference to regulate chemical and hazardous waste safety, top officials voiced optimism Saturday that delegates will approve new international controls on several industrial compounds and agree to clamp down on some cross-border pollution.

The three key international treaties that govern chemicals and hazardous waste, each headquartered in Geneva, are holding an unprecedented joint two-week convention of more than 1,500 delegates from 170 nations that is meant to consider new limits on some substances and look at ways the treaties can be better put to use together.

The conference will culminate in a high-level meeting among about 80 ministers on May 9-10.

Jim Willis, executive secretary of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, said he expects delegates will likely agree to gradually ban one of the commonly used flame retardants, hexabromocyclododecane, or HBCD — which is put in building insulation, furniture, vehicles and electronics — while exempting some uses in buildings.

Such a ban would come under the Stockholm Convention, which now regulates 22 toxic substances, such as DDT and PCBs, that travel long distances and don't break down easily, working their way up the food chain.

Willis told reporters that delegates also are expected to accept stricter requirements for disclosing information about exports of several other substances including a powerful herbicide, Paraquat. The others are an insecticide, Azinphos-methyl; two flame retardants, PentaBDE and OctaBDE; a fabric protector, PFOS; and the construction material, Chrysotile asbestos. That action would come under the Rotterdam Convention, which regulates information about the export and import of 43 hazardous chemicals.

Together, the three treaties aim to "help countries to take better control of the pesticides they agree to use," said Christine Fuell, a senior technical officer with the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization who helps oversee the Rotterdam Convention.

Perhaps the most contentious proposals involve HBCD — which has been found in human breast milk and tissues and in wildlife and marine life around the world, raising health concerns — and Chrysotile asbestos, which is linked to respiratory disease and lung cancer, said Joe DiGangi, a science adviser with advocacy group

IPEN, a global network of more than 700 public interest non-governmental organizations.

In the case of asbestos, Canada — a major producer of the mineral — and several other nations blocked a similar measure two years ago. This time around, Willis said, Canada appears to be supportive of the proposal, and he is hopeful that Russia, which has large reserves of asbestos and is a newcomer to the treaty, won't block action.

Swiss environment ambassador Franz Perrez, who will preside over talks on the Basel Convention, said he expects agreement on new ways of managing trade in hazardous waste, based on an Indonesian-Swiss initiative that includes technical guidelines on cross-border shipments of discarded electronic and electrical products. The Basel Convention regulates the exports and imports of hazardous waste.

Perrez said Switzerland, a major hub and producer in the chemical and pharmaceutical industries, proposed trying for new "synergies" among the three treaties it hosts in Geneva by holding a single conference that would seek more unified, global approaches.

All three treaties take decisions based on consensus among all the nations' delegates, but officials and observers say it is difficult for a single country to block action in the face of pressure from most or all of the others.

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