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INTERGOVERNMENTAL NEGOTIATING COMMITTEE FOR AN
INTERNATIONAL LEGALLY BINDING INSTRUMENT
FOR IMPLEMENTING INTERNATIONAL ACTION ON
CERTAIN PERSISTENT ORGANIC POLLUTANTS

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Agenda item 2 (c) of the provisional agenda*

REPORT BY THE SECRETARIAT ON INTER-SESSIONAL WORK REQUESTED BY THE COMMITTEE

Clearing-house mechanism for persistent organic pollutants

Note by the secretariat

INTRODUCTION

1. At the second session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, the Implementation Aspects Group requested the secretariat to compile, for consideration at the Committee's third session, among other items, and as stated in paragraph 96 (f) of the Committee's report on the work of its second session (UNEP/POPS/INC.2/6), an assessment of the feasibility of establishing a clearing-house mechanism, such as the mechanism used under the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, tailored to specific tasks relating to persistent organic pollutants (POPs). In that task, it could also incorporate the work being carried out by the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS) on the dissemination of information on chemical safety. In response to that request, the secretariat has compiled the information provided below.

* UNEP/POPS/INC.3/1.

I. COMPONENTS OF A CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

2. The term "clearing-house mechanism" can be defined in a number of ways. For the purpose of the present note, a clearing-house mechanism is a managed process to facilitate the exchange of information among sources and users of a given scope of information. This process can be divided into the following components:

(a) Collection: Information is received from various sources. It can be limited to certain sources or types of sources (e.g., national Governments) or it can be open to relevant information from any source. The collection of information can consist merely in receiving what information is supplied by sources on their own initiative, or may be more active, in that the clearing-house secretariat takes steps to ensure collection through such modalities as questionnaires, regular contacts, research, internet linkages to information sources and other means. Information can be submitted by mail, fax, e-mail or directly into an interactive internet site. The types of information exchanged can include not only technical and scientific information, but also rosters of expertise, focal point networks and information on technical assistance needs and available donor assistance;

(b) Processing: Information received is then managed. It can either be stored in a library, filing system or electronic database, or the source data can simply be linked, via the internet, to a central information management system. The way that information is managed will depend in large measure on the manner in which it is disseminated. If it is via e-mail or the internet, then electronic storage or links to existing electronic databases are most effective. If it is through hard-copy publications, then electronic means are still the most efficient, but the use of hard-copy sources remains possible. A number of information management tools are available, including geographic information systems (GIS), which express and analyse information geographically;

(c) Dissemination: Information managed within a clearing-house mechanism is made available to users through various means, each of which is designed to meet certain user needs. A query-response service allows users to contact the secretariat by mail, telephone, fax or e-mail, to obtain specific information upon request. Publications, including newsletters, are mailed, e-mailed (e.g., through list servers) or posted on internet sites. Internet homepages can provide much, if not all, of the information available in a clearing-house as regularly updated information to those who have access to the internet. Diskettes and CD-ROM for use on personal computers can provide large amounts of available data, while hard-copy mailing can meet the needs of others. Information can also be actively disseminated by providing training sessions or workshops in locations where there is limited awareness of what information is available or limited access to this information, or both;

(d) Free exchange: A clearing-house mechanism can also provide the means for interested parties to exchange information tailored to their specific needs, i.e., through a news group or mailing list where those

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interested can exchange experiences and technical information. An important element of such exchange is the wide dissemination of existing information sources and the means to access them. This would encourage information exchange between holders and end-users (including feedback), while ensuring that the main flow of information (e.g., that which is described in subparagraphs (a), (b) and (c) above) remains well defined by the network of information centres.

3. The focus of a clearing-house mechanism is to meet the needs of the expected users of the information. The extent to which a clearing-house is able actively to collect, process, distribute and exchange this information in a way that best meets those needs will depend in large part on the resources available.

II. EXAMPLES OF CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISMS

4. Below are examples of clearing-houses that involve environmental information, the first two of which are to support existing multilateral environmental agreements. IFCS is not discussed in this section, since it does not maintain a clearing-house of chemicals information. In fact, IFCS (see paragraph 8 below) requested the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to serve as a clearing-house for information on POPs. IFCS does, however, maintain an internet homepage (<http://www.who.int/ifcs/>), that includes meeting documents and related information.

A. UNEP OzonAction Information Clearing-house

5. The UNEP OzonAction Information Clearing-house (OAIC) was created under the Multilateral Fund of the Montreal Protocol for the Protection of the Ozone Layer. OAIC is an integrated information exchange service designed to assist Article 5 countries (which, by and large, are developing countries and a few countries with economies in transition) in meeting their commitments under the Montreal Protocol and its amendments to phase out ozone-depleting substances. OIAC provides technical, policy and scientific information on a wide range of ozone-depleting substance phase-out issues, including: alternative technologies, products and services for each industrial sector; directories of experts, consultants and key ozone focal points worldwide; technical literature abstracts and information on ordering documents; descriptions of national policies, legislation, regulations and programmes to phase-out ozone-depleting substances; listing of ozone protection events (workshops, conferences and meetings); news on the latest phase-out initiatives; and public awareness materials.

6. All services are performed in close liaison with the UNEP Technical and Economic Assessment Panel and the associated Technical and Economic Options Committees, as well as in partnership with Governments, industry and non-governmental organizations. The information is disseminated via the OzonAction website (<http://www.unepie.org/ozonaction.html/>), as well as by diskette, mail, fax and telephone media. OIAC maintains a query-response

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service and publishes information in the quarterly OzonAction newsletter.
(Source: <http://www.unepie.org/ozat/aboutus/infoexch.html>)

B. Clearing-house mechanism of the Convention on Biological Diversity

7. Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention on Biological Diversity states: "The Conference of the Parties, at its first meeting, shall determine how to establish a clearing-house mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation". This mechanism, simply called the Clearing-house Mechanism, was established in response to that mandate. The Clearing-house Mechanism promotes technical and scientific cooperation at all levels among the Parties. It also facilitates information exchange on key Convention articles (e.g., monitoring, in situ and ex situ conservation, research and training, access to genetic resources, access to and transfer of technology, and financial mechanism) and thematic areas (e.g., biosafety, traditional knowledge, species and taxonomy, protected areas, and capacity-building).

8. The Clearing-house Mechanism gathers and organizes information in a decentralized manner with partners in national Governments and elsewhere, coordinating efforts among them and with the secretariat to address topics of common interest. A key feature of the Clearing-house Mechanism is its network of national focal points, to which guidance is provided in establishing clearing-houses at the national level. These national clearing-house mechanisms are linked into the global Clearing-house Mechanism. To date, 135 Clearing-house Mechanism national focal points have been nominated, of which 73 have created their own internet homepages.

9. Dissemination of information is effected through hard-copy publication, including a newsletter, and through various electronic means, including e-mail list-servers, internet databases with lists of focal points and contacts, as well as a roster of experts and other useful information, and CD-ROM. The Clearing-house Mechanism has also developed a user guide. Regional workshops to address scientific and technical information needs were held in 1997 and 1998, and recommendations were formulated with a view to shaping the future work of the Clearing-house Mechanism. The Clearing-house Mechanism receives guidance from a regionally balanced informal advisory committee. (Source: <http://www.biodiv.org/chm/>)

C. Global Programme of Action

10. Paragraph 42 of the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities provides a mandate for the establishment of a clearing-house for information, practical experience and scientific and technical expertise relevant to developing and implementing strategies to deal with impacts of land-based sources of marine pollution. The clearing-house mechanism is to serve as a referral system, designed to allow decision makers to establish rapid and direct contact with organizations, institutions firms and/or individuals most able to provide

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relevant advice and assistance. The clearing-house mechanism would comprise three basic elements: a data directory containing information, practical experience and technical expertise organized by source category and economic sector; information delivery systems enabling decision makers and others to access what is available in the directory; and the organizational infrastructure to maintain the directory and delivery mechanisms.

11. Currently, the Global Programme of Action clearing-house functions through a network of relevant intergovernmental organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), UNEP, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO), which have lead responsibilities for certain source categories, including sewage, POPs, heavy metals, radioactive substances, nutrients, sediment mobilization, oils, and litter. The Global Programme of Action clearing-house is currently at a developmental stage. (Source: <http://www.unep.org/gpa/>)

III. EXISTING UNEP POPS CLEARING-HOUSE

12. At its second meeting, the IFCS Intersessional Group agreed that an "open file" should be created to provide more comprehensive reporting of peer-reviewed scientific information on the chemistry, toxicology, transport pathways, origin, transport and deposition of the 12 specified POPs on a global scale and the Group requested UNEP to serve as a clearing-house for that information (ISG/96.R.1.Rev.3, paragraphs A6 and A9). At its nineteenth session, by paragraph 13 (a) of decision 19/13 C of 7 February 1997, the UNEP Governing Council subsequently requested that UNEP, in collaboration with others, improve access to national information on POPs and improve access for developing nations to existing and future information on POPs issues by maintaining the UNEP clearing-house for information on POPs, including the electronic database on the internet.

13. The UNEP POPs clearing-house promotes the exchange of POPs information relevant to the ongoing negotiations of an international legally binding instrument on POPs, and to the immediate actions on POPs called for in paragraph 13 of UNEP Governing Council decision 19/13 C. For the negotiations, the clearing-house posts and maintains meeting documents, status reports, and meeting schedules on its internet site (<http://www.chem.unep.ch/pops>).

14. Included under the immediate actions are, inter alia, the proceedings of the regional and subregional POPs awareness raising workshops, an inventory of major existing sources of toxicological and regulatory information, case studies of POPs status in countries, a database on alternatives to POPs, information on polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) destruction capacity worldwide and guidance on PCB management, a bibliography of recent and comprehensive information on POPs, a collection of action plans to reduce or eliminate POPs, regulatory information on POPs and their

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chemical alternatives, an inventory of information on dioxin and furan sources of releases and links to other relevant internet sites. The clearing-house also maintains a network of UNEP POPs focal points in national Governments.

15. Efforts are made to keep this information updated, but lack of resources prevent this being done in a regular or systematic fashion. Relevant documents and the UNEP Chemicals newsletter are disseminated by mail to the POPs focal points, UNEP official points of contact and others on the UNEP Chemicals general mailing list. POPs information is available electronically at the UNEP POPs internet site reference above. Information on the clearing-house is presented at most meetings organized by UNEP Chemicals.

IV. CONCLUSION

15. The feasibility and comprehensiveness of a clearing-house mechanism will depend on the level of service to be provided and the resources available to accomplish it. One option would be to continue the UNEP POPs clearing-house in its current form. Another would be to raise the service provided to users to a level approximating that provided under the clearing-house mechanisms supporting the Convention on Biological Diversity or the Multilateral Fund of the Montreal Protocol. This would involve more active information collection efforts, more effective and efficient management of the information and larger-scale programmes to disseminate information. Implementing this second option would require significant additional resources.
