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EU proposes toxic recycling at UN meeting

EU pushes for an exemption to global phase out a PBT chemical that has adverse effects on the development of the nerve system and mental abilities of children.

Today in Geneva, at the 6th Conference of Parties of the Stockholm Convention (COP6), the EU proposed exemptions to the ban of a toxic chemical earmarked for global elimination. At issue is Hexabromocyclododecane (HBCD) - a brominated flame retardant widely used in building insulation, upholstery and electronics in the EU. HBCD is now ubiquitous in the environment globally, and can disrupt the hormone system, with potential adverse effects on the development of the nervous system and mental abilities of children. It warrants global action. The Convention expert committee recommended global elimination of HBCD and delegates at the meeting will decide on the proposal this week.

The European Union proposed exemptions to the HBCD ban, allowing the use of this highly toxic substance in insulation materials for all buildings as well as recycling of such material until 2024. Given the fact that the half-life of this chemical is about 50 years, such an exemption would technically extend the presence of this harmful chemical in the global environment and society for over a century. This is a clear violation of the rules of the Stockholm Convention and EU implementing regulation, which does not allow recycling, undermining its credibility.

Andreas Prevodnik from the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation says: “The Convention Expert Committee recognizes the dangers of this chemical and the existence of safer non-chemical alternatives. We need to stop using it now.”

In the EU HBCD is a Substance of Very High Concern under REACH and about to be severely restricted in use. Since HBCD will be promptly phased out in the EU, the exemption proposal appears to be for the purpose of use in developing countries that do not have the waste management capacity to effectively handle these products.

Building materials and recycled products containing HBCD are at risk of being exported to developing countries and economies in transition, transferring the toxic burden from the richer countries to poor countries where the capacity to deal with contaminated waste is limited, potentially adding to health problems and hampering poverty reduction. African countries and Norway expressed their deep concern regarding the EU proposal. A delegate from Norway

says: “There are available alternatives to all applications of HBCD. Norway is therefore of the opinion that a global ban without any exemptions would be warranted and the most appropriate action from the Conference of the Parties.”

Alexandra Caterbow from WECF says: “As EU environmental NGOs we find it shameful to see that the EU is violating the integrity of the Stockholm Convention, and putting economic interests before human health and the environment. We therefore call on the EU and its member states to drop their proposal and take their global responsibility, here at COP6 of the Stockholm Convention.”

Vito Buonsante from ClientEarth says: “The EU makes a mockery of the Convention and of its own rules by suggesting that HBCD could be recycled despite a clear prohibition from the Convention and the EU implementing Regulation on the recovery and recycling, of persistent organic pollutants.”

The fight is on.