Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Urban Pests
Chow-Yang Lee and William H. Robinson (editors), 2005.
Printed by Perniagaan Ph'ng @ P&Y Design Network, Malaysia.

THE STOCKHOLM CONVENTION ON PERSISTENT ORGANIC POLLUTANTS (POPS) AND THE ROLE OF UNEP – AN EXAMPLE OF INTERNATIONAL PESTICIDE REGULATION.

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Persistent organic pesticides are part of a larger group of chemicals known as Persistent Organic Pollutants or POPs, which also includes industrial chemicals and unwanted by-products such as dioxins that are formed during incomplete combustion processes. Negotiations of a global legally binding instrument to reduce and/or eliminate releases of POPs were started under the auspices of UNEP in 1998. In May 2001, over 120 countries agreed and adopted this global treaty, now named the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (3). The Stockholm Convention entered into force on 17 May 2004 when it had been ratified by 50 countries.

POPs are chemicals that persist, bioaccumulate in fatty tissues, biomagnify through the food-chain and cause adverse effects to health and the environment as concentrations build up in living organisms. In 1996 an international assessment of 12 POPs was carried out, including the 9 pesticides: aldrin, DDT, dieldrin, endrin, chlordane, heptachlor, hexachlorobenzene, mirex, toxaphene, polychlorinated biphenyls, as well as the industrial substances and by-products PCBs and dioxins and furans. With this and the evidence that these substances are transported through the environment across borders and around the globe, the international community recommended that international actions on POPs were urgently needed. In endorsing this recommendation, the UNEP Governing Council requested in 1997, that UNEP facilitate negotiations of a global instrument on POPs, starting with the initial list of 12 substances.

The Stockholm Convention requires a number of control actions to reduce and/or eliminate production, use and release of POPs. It further imposes certain trade restrictions and disposal requirements. The convention also has a procedure for adding other POPs to the treaty and has set up a financial mechanism for assisting developing countries and countries with economies in transition in their implementation of the treaty.

The 9 pesticides presently included are slated for ultimate elimination, with one acceptable purpose for use of DDT in disease vector control in countries that do not have affordable and effective alternatives in place. Among the other pesticides, endrin and toxaphene are to be eliminated immediately while others have time limited exemptions for specific uses, notably chlordane, heptachlor, and mirex for termite control.

Besides convening the negotiations, UNEP has initiated a number of actions that complement and support the negotiations. For pesticides, these activities have to large extent focussed on raising awareness of more sustainable approaches in both pest and vector control. There is a need for co-ordination between sectors when introducing new chemicals or other approaches for pest and disease vector management. For example, termite management is of concern for stakeholders in a number of economic sectors, in particular, the construction industry, agriculture and forestry.

UNEP is working together with FAO and WHO to promote integrated pest and vector management as well as collaboration between sectors to bring mutual benefits to agriculture, health and the environment. Jointly with FAO, UNEP established in 2000 an international expert group on termite biology and management. This group, which counts members from all continents, has developed guidance on alternatives approaches for termite control to assist countries in their efforts to replace the termiticides that are POPs. The group has also assisted the agencies in developing a proposal for an international project to demonstrate termite control based on IPM principles. The project has received a preliminary approval by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), which serves as the funding mechanism for the Stockholm Convention, and is expected to start in 2005.

UNEP is collaborating with WHO mainly to address the issue of DDT and malaria. Although Parties will be able to continue using DDT for indoor residual spraying until the Conference of Parties (COP) to the Convention decides otherwise, WHO and UNEP are promoting interventions that are based on principles of integrated vector management to help countries achieve a sustainable reduction of the need for DDT in malaria control. Several regional projects on DDT that have been developed for consideration by the GEF are at different stages in the approval process.