



REACH will not protect health unless it deals with the danger of low exposure, say scientists

Paris, Thursday 9 November 2006 – More than 500 scientists, doctors and representatives of health and environment groups meeting at UNESCO, Paris today will call for strong measures to control chemicals to help prevent cancers and other chronic illnesses.

Recent evidence that extremely low levels of exposure to some chemical contaminants can cause disease by interfering with the activity of genes will be presented at the “Environment and Sustainable Health: An International Assessment” conference. The “Paris Appeal Memorandum” will make unified scientific recommendations for the prevention of cancers, birth defects, brain development disorders and infertility.

The most urgent recommendations will focus on the importance of strengthening health protection via the European Union’s chemicals policy reform, also known as REACH. Génon Jensen, Executive Director of the Health and Environment Alliance and co-organiser of the conference* (1), says special attention needs to be given to using alternatives to harmful chemicals, something which can be achieved through a strong substitution principle. “If REACH is to come anywhere close to addressing dangerous low dose exposures, the substitution of harmful chemicals for non toxic ones whenever possible must be standard procedure,” she says.

Current political negotiations on REACH centre on when and how to replace toxic chemicals: whether the worst ones must be replaced *whenever* safer alternatives exist, or whether other criteria could prevent replacement *even if* safer alternatives exist. The final reading of this legislation will take place in the European Parliament next month. “It is now crucial that France, as the second largest EU chemical producer, takes the lead in achieving strong ‘substitution’ language in the on-going negotiations between Parliament, Council and Commission,” adds Yannick Vicaire from Greenpeace France.

The “precautionary approach” to public health and environmental sustainability makes a priority of replacement whenever better alternatives exist. Health, environment and women’s NGOs believe this approach is central to chemical management and related areas, such as waste incineration and the use of pesticides.

Sascha Gabizon, International Director of Women in Europe for a Common Future, notes that “substituting hazardous chemicals by safer alternatives whenever possible is the most effective way to protect women and future generations, given their specific susceptibility and vulnerability.

François Veillerette, from the French advocacy group Mouvement pour le Droit et le Respect des Générations Futures, a member of PAN-Europe, would like to see this approach governing the use of pesticides. In France, nearly 50% of the vegetables produced in intensive farming contain pesticides.

Health Care Without Harm, a group promoting environmental health and sustainability in health care, is working with notable success to identify and increase the availability of safer substitutes for medical

* Details of the conference organisers and the conference programme is available at www.artac.info

devices and hospital supplies and procedures. The concrete examples they provide illustrate that the substitution principle can work, but needs legislative force to become the norm.

Also present at the conference is Breast Cancer UK, an NGO which is greatly concerned with the rising disease rates in women. This group stresses the need to reduce women's exposures to harmful chemicals as a form of true primary prevention. It sees REACH as a unique opportunity to start a new era of precautionary public health.

In addition to a call for a strong substitution policy in REACH, the Paris Appeal Memorandum is likely to seek an authorisation process for pesticides, food additives and cosmetics similar to that used for medicines, new education programmes and research priorities, measures in waste management, and incentives to reduce pesticide use via the Common Agriculture Policy.

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