



Children are not adequately protected by current chemicals regulation

Vienna, Tuesday, 12 June 2007 – European Union policy on chemical safety needs to be substantially improved to prevent harm to children’s health, says Lisette Van Vliet, Toxics Policy Advisor, Health and Environment Alliance.

The Health and Environment Alliance is officially launching a project called Chemicals Health Monitor today with the aim of helping to ensure strong and effective implementation of EU chemicals policy, known as REACH. (1)

Development of the fetal brain can be disrupted by exposure to hazardous chemicals at levels that would be less damaging for adults. “Exposure to even extremely low doses of certain chemicals can cause major changes in the fetal brain and to the future health and fertility of the child,” Ms Van Vliet will tell a pre-meeting to the inter-governmental mid-term review of children’s environment and health in Vienna (13-15 June 2007). (2)

The Chemicals Health Monitor project aims to help inform the health community about the lack of testing of some chemicals; the inadequacy of some testing methods; and the need to replace some chemicals that are in current use with safer substitutes. It will also bring key scientific research findings to the health community to help speed up their translation into protective policy. (3)

Far too little is currently known about the effects of human exposure to chemicals used in everyday products and processes. Research by the European Chemicals Bureau in 1999 showed that only 14% of the highest production volume chemicals in Europe have a basic set of publicly-available health and safety data. The new EU chemical safety legislation, known as REACH (4), should help if it is properly implemented and strengthened.

Another problem is that when testing and standard setting is completed, it is not always adequate to protect the fetus or child. For example, toxicological studies on lead, methylmercury and PCBs did not pick up the damage these substances can cause to children. It was only years later that the evidence was demonstrated through epidemiological work showing the impaired brain function of children whose mothers had been exposed during pregnancy. (5)

For example, Professor Philippe Grandjean, from Harvard University and the University of Southern Denmark who will address the inter-governmental meeting on Wednesday 13 June 2007, has shown the effects of mercury in children in fishing communities in the Faroes Islands where the local diet is high in large, predatory fish known to contain substantial quantities of mercury.

The evidence that low-dose exposure to lead, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), arsenic and toluene was harmful to fetal brain development was published in the international medical publication *The Lancet* at the end of last year. (6)

Very recently, 200 scientists and doctors signed the “Faroes Statement” to emphasise the urgency of action and stating: “Prevention efforts against toxic chemicals should focus on protecting the fetus and small child. (7)

If action is taken to prevent exposure to developmental neurotoxic chemicals, much human suffering will be avoided. As well as the psychological stress, it is estimated that an individual's loss of just one IQ point is associated with an overall reduction in lifetime earnings of more than 2%.

Countries of the European Union could save billions of euros. Estimates from the US suggest that the costs to society of providing medical and support services to children and adults with impaired brain caused by toxic exposures equate to 52.6 billion dollars (39 billion euros per year). (8) (5)

The Chemicals Health Monitor project will promote a more precautionary approach to chemical regulation. "The new REACH legislation is important but its benefits will not extend to all chemicals and it will take years to implement fully. In the meantime, we would like to see greater use of safe substitutes for hazardous chemicals to protect the future of our children," concludes Génon Jensen, Executive Director, Health and Environment Alliance.

Contact:

Dr Lisette Van Vliet, Toxics Policy Advisor, Health and Environment Alliance, Tel. +32 2 234 3645.

Email: lisette@env-health.org +32 2 484 614 528

Genon K. Jensen, Executive Director, Health & Environment Alliance, 28 Boulevard Charlemagne, B-1000 Brussels. Tel: +32 2 234 3641 (direct) Fax : +32 2 234 3649 E-mail: genon@env-health.org
Mobile : +32 472 445968 Website: www.env-health.org

Diana Smith, Communications, Health and Environment Alliance, Tel: +33 1 55 25 25 84, Mobile: +33 6 33 04 2943 E-mail: Diana@gsmith.com.fr Website: www.env-health.org