Global chemical treaty adds lindane to ban list

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Neurotoxic pesticide one of nine new chemicals targeted by the POPs treaty

Geneva, May 11, 2009 -- In Geneva on Saturday, countries of the world agreed to a global ban on lindane, a highly toxic insecticide that persists in the environment. Hundreds of officials from more than 160 countries, as well as scores of representatives from NGOs, UN organizations, and Indigenous Peoples' groups came together last week for the 4th meeting of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs).

Twelve of the most environmentally damaging chemicals ever manufactured are already targeted for elimination under the agreement, and this week delegates resolved to add nine more, including lindane and two related substances that are unavoidable byproducts of its production.

"While we are pleased that production of lindane and its use in agriculture will now end, it's very disappointing that a loophole has been added allowing parties to use existing stocks in treatments for lice and scabies," says Karl Tupper, Staff Scientist with Pesticide Action Network (PAN) North America. "This pharmaceutical exemption in essence allows the disposal of existing stocks by dumping them on children's heads." A variety of alternative treatments for lice and scabies exist, including non-chemical therapies, which is why the pharmaceutical use of lindane is already banned in at least 52 countries across the globe. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends against the use of lindane, citing toxicity to the central nervous system and cases of seizures in children, as well as low efficacy.

A broad coalition—including the governments from the European Union to Mexico, Arctic Indigenous groups, and NGOs—supported listing lindane without the exemption. "This issue is very important for Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic because lindane and its related toxic waste byproducts are among the most prevalent contaminants in the circumpolar north, threatening our health through exposures in traditional foods," stated Mike Williams, Chief of the Yupiit Nation in Alaska. "For years, our children have been subjected to this harmful chemical to treat head lice. It is wrong to allow the use of lindane on our children. We know that there are healthy, safe alternatives."

The US, which had previously insisted on the exemption, announced at the meeting's opening on Monday that it now supported banning the chemical without the exemption.

After the meeting, Indigenous Peoples groups and NGOs including Pesticide Action Network and Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT), thanked parties for banning lindane from agriculture, and urged them to not exercise the exemption. Pamela Miller, from ACAT reminded parties that, "In allowing lindane to be used instead of mandating alternatives, countries should bear in mind that they are making an unnecessary choice that comes at the expense of the health and the environment, in particular the Arctic environment and its people."

First Nations in Canada and Native American Tribes in the U.S., including the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, the Assembly of First Nations, and the Assembly of Treaty Chiefs, issued resolutions calling for the Stockholm Convention to ban lindane without exemptions. The International Indian Treaty Council and ACAT hand delivered these resolutions to the delegates in Geneva.

The pharmaceutical exemption will expire after five years. The other eight chemicals added on Friday to the Stockholm Convention's list of POPs targeted for elimination are:

- two byproducts of lindane manufacturing -- alpha hexachlorocyclohexane and beta hexachlorocyclohexane;
- chlordecone, an agricultural pesticide;
- three types of flame retardants: hexabromodiphenyl ether and heptabromodiphenyl ether, tetrabromodiphenyl ether and pentabromodiphenyl ether, and hexabromobiphenyl;
- pentachlorobenzene (used in PCB products, in dye production, as a fungicide and as a flame retardant); and
- PFOS (perfluorooctane sulfonic acid, its salts and perfluorooctane sulfonyl fluoride), which remains to be eliminated or restricted.

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Convention participants available for interviews:
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Resources:
About the Stockholm Convention: http://chm.pops.int/
PAN information on lindane: www.panna.org/lindane
PAN information on DDT use for malaria control, including PAN Germany report on DDT and the Stockholm Convention: www.panna.org/ddt

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