

**UNECE****United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

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New right-to-know treaty on pollution takes shape

Key elements of a new UN treaty which will strengthen the public access to information about pollution fell into place as a week of intensive negotiations in Geneva entered their final day. The treaty – which will be a protocol to the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (the Aarhus Convention) – will make it easier for the public to find information about pollution and its sources through a mandatory system of reporting by companies.

Under the protocol, countries will have to set up national pollution inventories, known as **pollutant release and transfer registers (PRTRs)**. PRTRs require polluting companies to provide information on their releases of certain polluting substances, such as greenhouse gases, dioxins and heavy metals, to a national register accessible and searchable through the Internet. Such registers are already in place in some countries.

This week, negotiators agreed upon the main features of the PRTR system, which would effectively establish internationally recognized minimum standards for PRTRs. These include lists of specific pollutants and polluting activities, and ensuring public access to the data on the register. The protocol will initially focus on information on pollution from large industrial facilities but negotiators have opened the door to extending the registers to include more diffuse sources, such as pollution from traffic to air and pollution from agriculture to water.

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It had already been decided that the protocol should be open to all countries, including those which are not Parties to the parent-Convention and those which are not members of UNECE. During this week's negotiations, a number of decisions were made to accommodate the different types of existing PRTRs to allow for as many countries as possible to become Parties to the protocol and thereby bound by its provisions. This comes at the expense of the goal of having a single, highly harmonized worldwide PRTR system and the greater comparability of the data collected which would result from that. But negotiators considered it more important to recognise the differences in the approaches, notably between North America and Europe, and to accommodate both approaches to ensure broader participation.

A number of issues will not be solved at this meeting and one last meeting has therefore been scheduled for 27-31 January next year. The negotiators are under pressure to finalize the protocol swiftly, as it is expected to be ready for adoption by UNECE Environment Ministers when they meet at the fifth "Environment for Europe" Conference in Kiev in May 2003.

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