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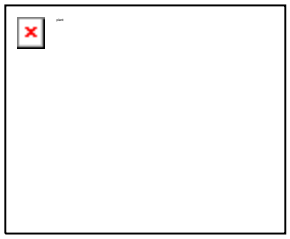
Europe Faces Up to Chlorine Mercury Legacy

BRUSSELS, Belgium, September 6, 2002 (ENS) - The European Union faces a bill of up to 330 million euros (US$324 million) to dispose safely of excess mercury stocks as it phases out an obsolete method of chlorine production, a new report from the European Commission warns. The duration of the phaseout is disputed, but it will be "at least a decade" before the last plant closes down, the commission says.

Last year the EU Environment Council expressed fears that the spare mercury could flood markets and cause environmental problems. Prompted by then Dutch Environment Minister Jan Pronk, it asked the commission to analyze the legal and other consequences of the phaseout.

In the report delivered by the commission, three options are outlined for dealing with the 12,000 to 15,000 metric tons of mercury that will be generated - re-use, ultimately outside the EU; intermediate storage; and long term "definitive" storage.



Mercury-cell plant **(Photo credit unknown)**

The commission does not indicate a preferred path, but states that definitive storage is the best option environmentally.

Re-use would be cheapest and is favored by industry. Initially, mercury from plants closing down would be taken up by those still operating. As the phaseout accelerates, the excess would be sold on world markets, "shifting the problem overseas."

A "significant part" could end up being used unrestricted in activities such as small scale gold mining, the report states.

Intermediate temporary storage of the mercury would be more costly, but would ensure public control over its polluting potential.

Definitive storage is the "sustainable approach." It would put a "total stop" to mercury emissions from chlorine in the European Union, and would encourage global emission reductions by setting a good example, the commission said.

The EU has no storage capacity, however, and Swedish estimates suggest an eventual cost of 15 to 22 euros per kilogram of mercury. This would increase by up to 10 percent, and a chlorine industry estimate predicts that shifting from mercury-cell plants will cost €3.1 billion (US$2.945 billion). The additional costs would probably result in industry opposition, the report says.

Legally, EU member states will have to decide case by case whether the spare mercury is classified as waste, and so are subject to EU and international waste shipment restrictions. This could prove crucial for plants trying to pass on their mercury for resale.

The Commission also recommends including mercury in the Rotterdam Convention's prior informed consent procedure for hazardous exports.

Arseen Seys of industry association Eurochlor told reporters today that the industry agrees with most of the report's findings. It favors mercury re-use for "justified and legitimate" applications, because it would prevent environmental damage from mining ore. Storing the used mercury would not curb demand elsewhere, he said.

Mercury-cell plants produce just over half of the EU's chlorine. Their conversion to less polluting techniques is being forced by the EU's Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control (IPPC) Directive from 1996, and a non-binding Ospar recommendation passed in 1990.

Under the IPPC law, authorities will have to issue emissions permits based on non-mercury techniques by 2007, but with significant leeway to take into account local conditions. Eurochlor has said this could allow newer plants to operate until around 2030.

Environmentalists, meanwhile, promote the date of 2010 agreed by Ospar. The exact deadline will depend on how member states interpret the two instruments.

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