

UN/ECE

Information Law on Pollution

The Committee on Environmental Policy* of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE) agreed recently at its annual meeting for work to start on a new, legally binding instrument requiring companies to report to the public on their polluting emissions into the environment.

The new law will be established under the auspices of the Aarhus Convention – the UN/ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (see also page 299). It is expected to require countries to establish pollution inventories known as pollutant release and transfer registers (PRTRs). Under PRTR systems, potentially polluting companies are required to report periodically (for example, annually) on their emissions of certain polluting substances to air, water and land, as well as on their off-site transfers of such substances for treatment or disposal. The reported information is provided in electronic form and made accessible to the public, including through the Internet, subject to limited exemptions. The new PRTR instrument is to be ready for adoption at the Fifth Ministerial Conference in the “Environment for Europe” series, scheduled to be held either in 2002 or 2003.

PRTRs have been extremely effective in reducing pollution – even though they only regulate information about

pollution, rather than pollution itself. The US system, known as the Toxics Release Inventory, is one of the best-established PRTR systems. During its first decade, reporting companies reduced their emissions by one half, preventing over 600,000 tonnes of toxic chemicals from being released into the environment. Few countries in Europe have so far developed PRTR systems, though some have plans to do so.

To date, the Aarhus Convention has mainly focused on information held by public authorities, but it is expected that the main obligations arising from the new instrument will apply to the private sector.

Negotiations on the new instrument will start early in 2001 in an intergovernmental working group established for this purpose. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and business interests will be invited to participate, as well as intergovernmental organisations active in the field.



Note

* The Committee on Environmental Policy is a high-level committee of senior government officials from all the ECE Member States, which include Europe, the US, Canada, the five Central Asian States which were part of the former USSR, and Israel.