

## REFERENCES TO OTHER TOPICS

### OECD: Agreement on Testing Methods

Approximately 100 experts from 15 OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) Member countries, the European Commission, industry and animal welfare groups reached agreement at an OECD conference in Stockholm on balancing the need for reliable tests to assess the safety of chemical substances and products and addressing animal welfare.

The terms of the agreement will be reflected in a comprehensive Guidance Document that is meant to be formally adopted by OECD Member States and used as the international consensus document for the validation and regulatory acceptance of new methods in hazard assessment.

The agreement includes detailed guidance on a new benchmark for the quality of testing methods. This Test Prediction Description will help scientists and regulators to convert results from tests into a reduction of the hazard so they can make regulatory decisions.

The Conference further agreed on practical guidance for the application of the 'three R's' principles (Replacement, Reduction and Refinement of animal tests) in method development. They also agreed on an independent review process to confirm the quality of each validation study and facilitate the regulatory use of new methods in hazard assessment. Although independent peer reviews are common practice for acceptance of publications in scientific literature, structured and transparent independent peer reviews are currently seldom applied in the acceptance process of new test methods for hazard assessment.

A detailed report of the Conference recommendations will be made available in May-June this year. Subsequently, a Guidance Document for the regulatory acceptance of test methods for hazard assessment will be finalised, taking into account the agreements reached at the Conference.

The OECD's website on the Test Guidelines programme ([www.oecd.org/ehs/test](http://www.oecd.org/ehs/test)) will provide further details of the Conference and its outcome.

### Americas: Health and Environment Ministers Meet

The first meeting of the Health and Environment Ministers of the Americas was held from 4-5 March 2002 in Ottawa, Canada. Ministers of Health and Environment from 31 States of the Americas participated, together with over 150 other representatives of governments, non-governmental organisations and United Nations agencies.

The Meeting's goal was to build bridges between the health and environment sectors to strengthen countries' capacities to manage health and environment issues effectively, and contribute to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg.

The meeting concluded with the adoption of a Ministerial Communiqué on health and the environment that will feed into the WSSD and Summit of the Americas processes. The Communiqué established an agenda and an ongoing process for future work on environment and health issues.

### Hazardous Waste: Strategic Plan

Experts have proposed a 10-year strategic plan for work under the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and their Disposal. The plan was drafted by the Basel Convention secretariat, and identifies as one of the specific goals the use of the Convention's regional centres as 'effective regional mechanisms to facilitate the coordinated implementation' of the Treaty and related international agreements.

One of the key activities identified in the plan as deserving priority attention is ensuring that adequate domestic framework legislation is in place among Convention parties for dealing with hazardous waste, including the establishment of national hazardous waste management plans. Another priority is to ensure that administrative authorities responsible for implementing the Convention are designated and effective mechanisms for coordinating different authorities are in place. A further activity is to put in place the standards methodology and institutional, legal and technical requirements needed to prepare national hazardous wastes inventories.

The plan also calls for national legislation for combating illegal traffic in hazardous waste and its disposal, training seminars for customs officials in identifying and preventing illegal waste traf-

fic, and national and regional programmes for the training of enforcement personnel.

### Brazil: 'Ecological Corridor'

The European Commission will give 7 million euros to a pilot project designed to set up an 'ecological corridor', under the programme to conserve the Brazilian rain forest. The EU's contribution to the programme, which is worth a total of 39 million euros, will be restricted to the 'Central Amazon corridor'. The 'Central Atlantic Forest corridor' component is to be financed by other donors. The project will take five years to complete.

The ecological corridor approach proposes a new approach to biodiversity protection in 'corridors' or 'bioregions' located in the Amazon and Atlantic rain forests. One challenge is to re-establish connectivity among the ecological islands that have become disconnected from other fragments or remaining natural habitats by human industry or development. It is hoped that linking official conservation units, private reserves and indigenous land within larger rain forest corridors will improve the ecology of these areas.

### CITES: Warning on Brazilian Mahogany

The Secretariat of the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) has advised CITES members not to import Brazilian mahogany at the moment due to concerns as to whether or not the timber was legally logged. The mahogany trade is overseen by CITES in order to prevent unsustainable or illegal exploitation of tropical forests.

In 2001, Greenpeace exposed illegal activities and corruption in a report on the mahogany trade. Pending investigations into the claim, the Brazilian government suspended indefinitely the trading of mahogany in October 2001. Following investigation by the Brazilian Environment Agency IBAMA during October and November 2001, a further ban was imposed, halting the logging of mahogany in December 2001. However, despite that ban, some companies have managed to continue exporting mahogany, and eight of these companies have exported over 15,000 cubic metres between 20 December 2001 and March 2002, with an export value of around \$11 million.

Following a Brazilian government ruling last year to stop the illegal mahogany trade, a number of powerful mahogany exporters took legal action and were allowed by court decision to continue to traffic illegal mahogany to countries including the USA, Canada, Chile, Germany, the Netherlands, UK and Belgium. According to IBAMA's investigations last year, at least 70 per cent of mahogany has been illegally obtained, with the majority stolen from public and Indian lands.

### Global Warming: Glacial Lakes Flood Threat

Scientists with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) have warned that nearly 50 lakes, high in the Himalayas, could burst their banks, sending millions of gallons of deadly floodwaters down valleys, putting at risk tens of thousands of lives.

The lakes are rapidly filling with icy water as rising temperatures in the region accelerate the melting of the glaciers and snowfields that feed them. The scientists have found at least 44 glacial lakes in Nepal and Bhutan that are filling so rapidly they could burst their banks in as little as five years' time.

In Nepal, data from 49 monitoring stations reveals a clear increase in temperature since the mid-1970s, with highest temperatures found at higher altitudes. On average, air temperatures here are one degree centigrade higher than in the 1970s, and are rising by 0.06°C per year.

Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) are not a new phenomenon, but there is evidence that the frequency of such events has risen over the past three decades. The new research began in 1999 and is based on topographic maps, aerial photographs and satellite images from Landsat, Spot and IRS craft. The survey has identified 3,252 glaciers and 2,323 glacial lakes in Nepal, and 677 glaciers and 2,674 glacial lakes in Bhutan. Satellite mapping and other surveys indicate that, for example, the glaciers in Bhutan are retreating at a rate of 30-40 metres a year, and in some areas the retreat is even faster.

For background information on UNEP's glacial lake outburst

flood monitoring and early warning, see [www.rrcap.unep.org/issues/glof/](http://www.rrcap.unep.org/issues/glof/).

### Depleted Uranium: Low-level Contamination

At the end of March 2002, a new study by UNEP of six sites in Serbia and Montenegro that were struck by depleted uranium (DU) munitions during the 1999 Kosovo conflict confirms the presence at five sites of widespread, but low-level, DU contamination.

The study concludes that the DU sites studied do not present immediate radioactive or toxic risks for the environment or human health. These findings are consistent with those of UNEP's 2001 DU study, carried out in Kosovo. Together, the two studies cover the entire geographical area affected by DU munitions during the Kosovo conflict.

However, UNEP recommends that the relevant authorities take precautionary measures. The most important concern is the potential for future groundwater contamination by corroding penetrators (ammunition tips made out of DU). The penetrators recovered by the UNEP team had decreased in mass by 10–15 per cent due to corrosion. UNEP stresses that this rapid corrosion emphasises the importance of monitoring water quality at the DU sites on an annual basis.

The study was conducted in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with additional support from the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The report is available at <http://postconflict.unep.ch/>.

### Decline in Dugong Populations

Findings from the first ever global study of the dugong, the 'sea cow' or 'elephant of the sea', indicate that coastal developments, boat traffic, fishermen's nets and increasing pollution are among the list of increasing threats which are contributing to a decline in the dugong's fortunes. The report has gathered information on the state of the dugong from researchers, local people, fishermen and government officials in the 37 countries and territories where the animal has historically been recorded.

The study, which has been funded by organisations including UNEP, IUCN (the World Conservation Union), UNEP's World Conservation Monitoring Centre and the CRC Reef Research Centre, makes urgent conservation recommendations aimed at stemming the decline of the dugong and boosting its numbers. These centre around the protection of seagrass beds upon which these herbivorous animals are almost totally dependent for food. Seagrasses require sunlight to thrive. In many areas of the world, seagrass beds are being cleared for development or smothered by silt and mud as a result of run-off due to overgrazing, intensive agriculture and deforestation.

The threats to the animal should be of critical concern to the billions of people who rely on the oceans for their livelihoods. For if the dugong, a key indicator species, is declining, then the coastal environment, which provides protein in the form of fish and incomes in terms of tourism, is also being degraded.

According to the scientist responsible for the report, the situation in East Africa is particularly alarming, and it is possible that this will be the next place where the dugong becomes extinct, unless urgent action is taken. Dugongs reproduce at a very low rate, with females rarely producing more than one calf, some time between the ages of six and 17 years old, and failing to reproduce at all during times of food shortages.

Climate change, together with the anticipated rise in more violent, damaging storms and flash floods, poses a new threat. The report notes that such events have, in places like South East Asia and Australia, devastated hundreds of square kilometres of seagrass beds in recent years.

The study also highlights the need for countries with dugong populations to strengthen conservation initiatives with neighbouring countries, including signing and ratifying the Convention on Migratory Species. Dugongs, which were once thought to be relatively sedentary, have been found to travel up to 600 km in a few days to search for food, the report says.

The full report can be downloaded from [www.unep.org/dewa/water/](http://www.unep.org/dewa/water/).

### Biodiversity Conservation in Central Africa

The Commission has decided to allocate 1,696,537 euros out of its 2002 Budget to a project promoting biodiversity conservation in Central Africa by valorising flagship species: lowland gorillas, forest elephants, marine turtles and whales.

The project's total cost is estimated at 2,319,387 euros. The countries to benefit are Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Central African Republic, the Congo and Sao Tome.

These funds are granted under Regulation 2493/2000/EC on measures to promote the full integration of the environmental dimension in the developing process of developing countries and Regulation 2494/2000/EC on measures to promote the conservation and sustainable management of tropical and other forests in developing countries.

### UNEP: Cleaner Production

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has launched a new 'Life-Cycle Initiative' to help combat the environmental impact of rising consumption patterns. The Initiative is a collaboration between UNEP and the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry (SETAC) and will help governments, businesses and consumers to adopt more environment-friendly policies, practices and lifestyles. It was launched at the start of UNEP's 7th International High-Level Seminar on Cleaner Production (CP-7), the biennial global forum that looks at progress made in promoting sustainable production and consumption.

The Life-Cycle Initiative will help address problems such as finding alternatives to hazardous substances in products such as lead, as well as better eco-labelling and product design systems. For more information about CP-7, see [www.unep.org/pc/cp7/](http://www.unep.org/pc/cp7/).