



## Press Release

### Safer Chemicals Management Moves Closer

**GENEVA, 15 May** – The world has taken significant steps this week towards ensuring that chemicals are produced, used and disposed of as safely as possible. The second International Conference on Chemicals Management – ICCM2 – which ends today, has made progress in several key areas and has defined its priorities for future work.

Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), who was at the high-level segment of the conference, said: “Reaping the benefits that chemicals offer to a modern society while reducing their potential for harm to the lowest level possible is a task for everyone – governments, international agencies like UNEP and many others, non-governmental organisations, and scientists. SAICM this week really has proved its worth as the one worldwide forum which brings together the people who can make change happen. I am particularly encouraged at the way it has focussed attention on the four emerging issues – nanotechnology, e-waste, chemicals in everyday products, and lead in paint – because that will encourage us all to work harder to find some answers.”

Conference president is Dr Ivan Erzen of Slovenia said: “This is a unique and comprehensive effort to address chemicals issues holistically, bringing all concerned actors and stakeholders to one table, with equal rights of participation and negotiation. The inclusion of all sectors, whether private or public, helps us to better understand our respective concerns and interests. SAICM is uniquely equipped to facilitate a dialogue between Governments, intergovernmental organizations, industry, non-governmental organizations and civil society.”

The ICCM is the governing body of the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management, SAICM, which is part of UNEP. The co-ordinator of the SAICM secretariat, Matthew Gubb, said: “The Conference has also considered how to ensure that sufficient resources are available to give meaning to the Strategic Approach in developing countries. SAICM has already been successful with its Quick Start Programme, a start-up trust fund which is currently running projects worth USD 20 million in close to 80 countries.” He added that “the Conference considered that more efforts were necessary to achieve the goal of minimizing the risks of chemicals to human health and the environment.”

Apart from its work on the emerging issues (see Notes to Editors), ICCM2 held two high-level round-tables, one on finance and the other on public health, the environment and chemicals management.

Concrete results from the conference, attended by almost 800 delegates, are expected in relation to the consideration of emerging issues, the linkages between health as well

as sustainable development and chemicals management, and the financing of sound chemicals management.

## Notes to Editors:

### SAICM's Four Emerging Issues

In 2009 SAICM has chosen four topics as emerging policy issues:

- nanotechnology and manufactured nanomaterials
- chemicals in products
- electronic waste
- lead in paint.

A working definition is that each is "an issue involving the production, distribution and use of chemicals which has not yet been generally recognised or sufficiently addressed but which may have significant adverse effects on human beings and/or the environment".

**Nanotechnology** is about developing very small objects, typically at a scale of a millionth of a millimetre. One nanometre is about 1/50,000th the width of a human hair. First-generation nanotechnology is already on the market in products such as paints, coatings and cosmetics, medical appliances and diagnostic tools, clothing, household appliances, food packaging, plastics and fuel catalysts.

Examples include:

- improved solar collectors and wind turbines
- better batteries
- replacements for highly polluting brominated flame retardants
- fuel additives and energy savers
- the provision of clean water.

But inhaling minute particles can damage the lungs, arteries and the entire cardiovascular system. Are nanotech products similarly damaging? And what happens when they break down, or interact with other substances? Can nanoparticles penetrate the skin, or cross the blood-brain barrier? Will they distort commodity markets, disrupt trade and destroy jobs? The potential for nanotechnology to widen existing economic gaps is significant.

**Chemicals in Products** - this category can be understood as "chemicals in products where you might not expect to find them". We expect to find chemicals developed by humans in pesticides and pharmaceuticals, for example, but we may forget that they are also in tables, books, clothes and shoes. Particularly vulnerable groups may face heightened risks. These can include children at all stages of development, including before birth. Sometimes the risks can be substantial, as from lead in jewellery, and phthalates in plastics. Historically, reducing chemical risks has concentrated on releases during manufacturing. But we now realise that dangerous substances may also be released from products during use, and at the end of their useful lives.

**Electronic Waste** is known also as e-waste or Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE). It comes from machines like fridges, air conditioners, microwave ovens, fluorescent light bulbs, washing machines, computers, mobile telephones, TVs

and stereo equipment. The high rate of obsolescence in many of these means a fast turnover and a huge waste stream, much of which is exported from developed to developing countries, sometimes for further use as second-hand equipment and sometimes as end-of-life waste. E-waste contains persistent, bio-accumulative and hazardous (PBT) substances like heavy metals (lead, nickel, chromium, mercury) and organic pollutants like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and brominated flame retardants (BFRs). Many developing countries do not have the infrastructure to manage e-waste properly, or an effective regulatory framework. Nor do many people realise how dangerous the wastes can be.

**Lead in Paint.** No level of exposure to lead is considered safe. It is recognised today as one of the twenty leading risk factors contributing to the global burden of disease. Eliminating lead exposure from gasoline has been one of the most significant environment health improvements in recent times. But lead-containing products are still widely made and sold across much of the developing world. Lead in paint is the second largest source of exposure to lead following exposure from gasoline. Paint containing lead is used in infrastructure like bridges, industry (car parts) and for marine uses, as well as domestically. The evidence of neurological damage, especially to children (whose intelligence can be impaired) and to workers in the lead industry is beyond doubt. Adults can suffer renal and cardiovascular damage. Some studies suggest a link to behavioural problems as well. Lead damage is irreversible, and its effects appear to persist into adolescence and adulthood. House dust is the commonest way in which children are harmed by lead in paint. The lead remains a risk for many years after the paint has been used. Small intelligence changes in an individual child can have substantial impacts on an entire population.

**About SAICM:** (<http://www.saicm.org/index.php?ql=h&content=home>)

The **Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM)** is a policy framework. SAICM has as its overall objective the achievement of the sound management of chemicals throughout their life cycle so that, by 2020, chemicals are produced and used in ways that minimize significant adverse impacts on human health and the environment. This “2020 goal” was adopted by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 as part of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

SAICM comprises the **Dubai Declaration on International Chemicals Management**, expressing high-level political commitment to SAICM, and an **Overarching Policy Strategy** which sets out its scope, needs, objectives, financial considerations, underlying principles and approaches and implementation and review arrangements. Objectives are grouped under five themes: risk reduction; knowledge and information; governance; capacity-building and technical cooperation; and illegal international traffic.

The Declaration and Strategy are accompanied by a **Global Plan of Action**, a working tool and guidance document to support implementation of SAICM and other relevant international initiatives.

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