



Member states fail to address the chemical threat

Brussels, 13 December 2005 - Environmental, women's, health and consumer organisations expressed disappointment that EU ministers failed today to seize a unique opportunity to protect people and the environment from the threat of toxic chemicals.

The Council rejected a crucial principle adopted last month by the European Parliament: the requirement to substitute hazardous chemicals with safer alternatives whenever possible. Although chemical producers would be required to 'assess' substitutes for a hazardous chemical, decision-makers will still have to grant an authorisation under an 'adequate control' procedure, even if safer alternatives are available. This loophole represents little change from the current, flawed system, which has failed to control the most dangerous chemicals and hinders safe, innovative products from entering the market.

The Council strengthened substitution requirements for persistent and bioaccumulative chemicals, which represent only a fraction of all hazardous chemicals. However, Member States left the door open for carcinogens, chemicals that are toxic to reproduction (e.g. the phthalate DEHP) and hormone-disrupting substances (e.g. bisphenol A) to stay on the market, even if safer alternatives exist.

The Council also voted to drastically reduce safety data that chemical producers would be obliged to supply, particularly for substances produced in low quantities. Thousands of chemicals could thus stay on the market, despite no health information being available. This, too, undermines the likelihood of identifying safer alternatives. Scandals such as the recent contamination of baby milk in Europe by a potentially hazardous chemical will continue to happen as long as we lack important safety data.

It is essential that the Parliament reaffirms its support for 'mandatory substitution' at the Second Reading, next year. This would make sure that, among other benefits, REACH delivers savings worth €90 billion over 30 years in the cost of treating key occupational diseases due to chemical contamination. After four years of REACH being watered down under chemical industry pressure, putting into practice a strong substitution obligation is the most important opportunity left to address the growing toxic chemical contamination and to ensure that human health and the environment are given the necessary protection.

Contacts:

Mecki Naschke, EEB, +32 (0)2 2981094

Lisette van Vliet, EPHA Environment Network (EEN), +32(0)2 233 3877

Javier Calvo, Eurocoop, +32 (0)2 285 0076

Aleksandra Kordecka, Friends of the Earth Europe, +32 (0)2 542 61 08

Nadia Haiama-Neurohr, Greenpeace , +32 (0)2 274 1913

Daniela Rosche, WECF, +31-6-2295-0027

Noemi Cano, WWF DetoX Campaign, +32 (0)479 610451