

The Basel Convention At A Glance...

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal is the most comprehensive global environmental treaty on hazardous and other wastes.

It has 170 member countries (Parties) and aims to protect human health and the environment against the adverse effects resulting from the generation, management, transboundary movements and disposal of hazardous and other wastes.

Why the Basel Convention was created...

The cross-border transport of hazardous wastes seized the public's attention in the 1980s. The misadventures of "toxic ships" such as the *Katrin B* and the *Pelicano*, sailing from port to port trying to offload their poisonous cargoes made the front-page headlines around the world. These tragic incidents were motivated in good part by tighter environmental regulations in industrialized countries. As the costs of waste disposal skyrocketed, "toxic traders" searching for cheaper solutions started shipping hazardous wastes to Africa, Eastern Europe and other regions. Once on shore, these waste shipments were dumped indiscriminately, spilled accidentally or managed improperly, causing severe health problems -even death- and poisoning the land, water and air for decades or centuries.

To combat these practices, the Basel Convention was negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme in the late 1980s. It was adopted in 1989 and entered into force in 1992.



How it works...

First, the Basel Convention regulates the trans-boundary movements of hazardous and other wastes applying the "Prior Informed Consent" procedure (shipments made without consent are illegal). Shipments to and from non-Parties are illegal unless there is a special agreement. Each Party is required to introduce appropriate national or domestic legislation to prevent and punish illegal traffic in hazardous and other wastes. Illegal traffic is criminal.

Second, the Convention obliges its Parties to ensure that hazardous and other wastes are managed and disposed of in an environmentally sound manner (ESM). To this end, Parties are expected to minimize the quantities that are moved across borders, to treat and dispose of wastes as close as possible to their place of generation and to prevent or minimize the generation of wastes at source. Strong controls have to be applied from the moment of generation of a hazardous waste to its storage, transport, treatment, reuse, recycling, recovery and final disposal.



Did you know?

The Basel Convention has estimated the amount of hazardous and other waste generated for 2000 and 2001 at 318 and 338 millions tonnes respectively. These figures are based on reports from the Parties to the Convention, which may not give the complete picture. Compare this with the almost 4 billion tonnes estimated by the OECD as generated by their 25 member countries in 2001 (Environmental Outlook, OECD).

Why the Convention is relevant...

Sixty sea containers holding 1600 tonnes of wastes were seized by the Dutch port authorities. The wastes were officially declared as recovered paper on its way to China from the United Kingdom. However it was found to contain bales of compacted household waste, food packaging and residues, plastic bags, waste wood and textiles. It was discovered that the wastes were first transported to the Dutch ports by lorry and ferry, where the bales were transferred on to sea containers. Neither the Chinese, UK nor the Dutch authorities had given their consent to the import, export or transit of the waste. The shipment was returned to the country of export.

(Source: EUWID RD No. 09 4 May 2005)

What is waste under the Basel Convention?

Wastes are substances or objects which are disposed of or are intended to be disposed of or are required to be disposed of by the provisions of national law. Annex I of the Convention, as further clarified in Annexes VIII and IX, lists those wastes that are classified as hazardous and subject to the control procedures under the Convention. Annex II of the Convention identifies those wastes that require special consideration (known as "other wastes", and which primarily refer to household wastes). Parties may also inform the Convention Secretariat of additional wastes, other than the wastes listed in Annexes I and II of Convention, that are considered or defined as hazardous wastes under their national legislation and of any requirements concerning transboundary movement procedures applicable to such wastes.

"Disposal" (as defined by the Convention) includes operations resulting in final disposal and operations which may lead to resource recovery, recycling, reclamation, direct re-use or alternative uses.

Examples of wastes regulated by the Basel Convention...

- Biomedical and healthcare wastes
- Used oils
- Used lead acid batteries
- Persistent Organic Pollutant wastes (POPs wastes), chemicals and pesticides that persist for many years in the environment. They are transported great distances from their point of release, bioaccumulate (thus threatening humans and animals at the top of the food chain), and cause a range of health effects.
- Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs), compounds used in industry as heat exchange fluids, in electric transformers and capacitors, and as additives in paint, carbonless copy paper, sealants and plastics.
- Thousands of chemical wastes generated by industries and other consumers.



Who makes the decisions on how the Convention should operate?

The Conference of the Parties (known as the COP), of which all the States that are party to the Convention are members, is the primary organ of the Convention. The Conference of the Parties develops the policies that will guide the implementation of the Convention, and it can adopt amendments to the Convention, as well as new instruments, such as Protocols, if it considers that these would assist in the achievement of the goals of the Convention. The COP meets at least once every two years, and seeks to reach its decisions by consensus.



Did you know?

Reports to the Basel Convention suggest that there are at least 8.5 million tonnes of hazardous waste moving from country to country each year¹.

Of these 8.5 million tonnes of hazardous wastes sent for disposal abroad, much is received as a welcome source of business. Many countries do, however, complain that they are receiving shipments which they never agreed to and which they are unable to deal with properly.

Some topical issues handled by the Basel Convention...

- Electronic and electrical waste (“e-waste”) such as mobile phones and computers
- Ships destined for dismantling
- Mercury and asbestos wastes
- Illegal dumping of hazardous wastes

¹ Based on national reports transmitted to the Secretariat of the Basel Convention in 2001.

The Basel Convention Secretariat

The Secretariat services the Convention by providing logistical and substantive support to the Parties (in accordance with mandates provided by the Convention and the COP) to facilitate the implementation of the Convention. The Secretariat is administered by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and is based in Geneva. The Secretariat reports to the COP.

The Basel Convention also has 14 Basel Convention Regional and Coordinating Centres in the following locations: Argentina, China, Egypt, El Salvador, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Senegal, Slovak Republic, South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (Samoa), South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay. The Centres develop and undertake regional projects, and deliver training and technology transfer for the implementation of the Convention.



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