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Eliminate All Hazardous Chemicals by 2020

In 2002 the world's nations signed onto a broad commitment that, by 2020, the global community would ensure that all chemicals would be "used and produced in ways that lead to the minimization of adverse effects on human health and the environment." This was one successful outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

How can we achieve such a goal? One approach is to trust industry to make a voluntary commitment to clean up its act. Since the chemical industry has been kicking and screaming against most kinds of regulation, and doing



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Severn Suzuki in 2007.

It is not enough that governments decide that protecting the health of their population and the environment is voluntary.

— Karen Suassuna, Associaco de Combate aos POPs, Brazil

its utmost to sabotage the existing global agreements, its conduct does not give much confidence that it is up to the task. With the US refusing to ratify the global conventions, and US delegations being little more than the voice of the chemical industry, the chances of this happening are next to nil.

Alongside the global conventions, the United Nations Environment Program has worked with the world's nations to craft a very broad, all-encompassing voluntary agreement known as the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM). This stems from a desire by many to pull together a complicated jigsaw of regional and global voluntary agreements on different aspects of safe chemical management into one coherent approach.

The SAICM Declaration and Global Plan of Action were finally agreed on at Dubai in 2006, after "teetering on the brink of disaster as the Bush Administration demanded sweeping concessions, rebuffed all efforts to find common ground and stood alone against over 140 countries to resist the agreement." The US was determined that "the environment and public health protection would always take a back seat to trade."¹

The Plan lists 271 activities that governments, industry and others have agreed to undertake. Among them:

- Assess national chemicals management.
- Identify gaps and prioritize actions.
- Promote the use of safe and effective alternatives.

- Provide training in clean production techniques.

It is encouraging that the world has agreed to such a plan, since global chemical production is set to climb by as much as 80% by 2020. Throughout the negotiations, however, the United States fought the idea that the plan would ever be anything more than voluntary and balked, unsuccessfully, at the inclusion of the precautionary principle. Both Canada and the US fought the idea that there should be liability and compensation. The European Union wanted an agreement regarding all chemical products, but the US refused to include the chemicals in food and medicines.

We have a long way to go. For the next few years, the world needs to develop a dual-track approach. On one track, we need to ensure that the commitments of the Dubai Declaration are implemented, and press our governments to act on each of the Global Action Plan's 271 components.

On the other track, we need to push for zero emissions, toxics use reduction, mandatory phase-outs and clean production. We need to support the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN) and its small band of committed staff as they work for a truly meaningful global commitment to eliminate the most persistent organic pollutants (see Solution 93). During the Dubai Conference, IPEN launched a Declaration for a Toxic Free Future with 25 points that describe what is needed with clarity and purpose. When the Dubai Declaration was adopted,

however, the world's media ignored it completely. We need to elevate this decree to the global importance that it deserves.

Imagine if people from cancer agencies, support groups and action groups all over the world were to attend such conferences and inform their members about progress on an hour-by-hour basis. Imagine if we were to besiege our politicians with letters, demanding that they sign mandatory agreements, not voluntary ones. Imagine if a child could be invited to speak at the next such conference, as the 12-year-old Severn Suzuki did at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, giving voice to her hopes and fears for the future.

"What you do makes me cry at night," she said. "You grown-ups say you love us. I challenge you, please make your actions reflect your words."

- International Forum on Chemical Safety: www.who.int/ifcs
- International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN): www.ipen.ecn.cz
- International Program on Chemical Safety: www.who.int/ipcs
- Inter-Organizational Program for the Sound Management of Chemicals: www.who.int/iomc
- Severn Suzuki's Speech at Rio: www.thespeechsite.com/famous/SevernSuzuki-1.htm
- Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management: www.chem.unep.ch/saicm
- UNEP's Chemicals Program: www.chem.unep.ch