

- * land resources issues - soil loss; combating deforestation/forest principles; desertification and drought
- * conservation of biological diversity
- * environmentally sound management of biotechnology
- * protecting the oceans, seas and fresh water resources
- * environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals, hazardous wastes, sewage and radioactive wastes
- * international institutional arrangements and international legal instruments and mechanisms.

Agreement on the funding of Agency 21 has not been reached and this aspect will be negotiated at UNCED.

Other issues which will be considered at UNCED include technology transfer, and conventions on climate change and biodiversity.

It is envisaged that UNCED will be a springboard for future global cooperation and commitment to the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

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AUSTRALIAN ACCESSION BRINGS HAZARDOUS WASTES CONVENTION INTO FORCE

On 5 February 1992, Australia was the 20th country to join the Basel Convention, thereby bringing it into force internationally on 5 May 1992.

In the last two decades the management of hazardous waste has become an issue of great concern to the international community. It has been estimated that globally 325-375 million tonnes of hazardous waste are generated each year.

In the 1980s, there were a number of serious incidents which resulted from the illegal dumping of hazardous waste in developing countries. Arguably the worst was the dumping of 3,800 tons of hazardous waste in Nigeria.

An Italian businessman resident in Nigeria had forged documents and permits to import drums of waste PCBs and radioactive materials. The drums were stored at a site at Koko and the owner did not know the contents of the drums but had rented his land to the importer for over five years. Many drums were damaged and leaking. Labourers packing the drums into containers for movement back to Italy suffered very bad chemical burns. Some were hospitalised and one man was paralysed. While the waste was eventually removed, there were grave concerns about surface and groundwater contamination.

Incidents such as this led to the negotiation of the Basel Convention on the Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, 1989. Australia was active in the negotiation of this agreement which is the first multilateral treaty imposing legal obligations on states in relation to the transboundary movement of hazardous wastes.

The main elements of the Convention are:

- obligations on Parties to minimise the generation and movement of hazardous waste;

- . Parties to the Convention cannot send hazardous wastes to other Convention Parties that ban imports; similarly Convention Parties cannot ship hazardous wastes to non-Parties;
- . the so-called principle of "prior informed consent" according to which, before an exporting country can start a shipment on its way, it must have the importing country's written consent. The exporting country must first provide detailed information on the intended export to the importing country to allow it to assess the risk;
- . shipments between Convention Parties are not permitted where the importing country does not have the facilities to dispose of the wastes in an environmentally sound manner;
- . shipments of hazardous wastes must be packaged, labelled and transported in conformity with generally accepted international rules and standards;
- . to ensure that international trade in commonly recycled commercially valuable materials is not impeded, such as scrap metal and used paper, Convention Parties may register with the Convention Secretariat bilateral agreements which conform to the environmental standards set out in the Convention;
- . in case of illegal shipments of hazardous wastes, the state of export must accept the return of the waste and ensure its safe disposal;
- . the requirement that the domestic disposal of hazardous wastes in the most environmentally friendly manner possible.

At present Australia does not dispose of certain major types of hazardous waste, but exports them. These include polychlorobiphenyls and organochloride pesticides. Australia has both national - the Hazardous Waste (Regulation of Exports and Imports) Act 1989 - and State legislation dealing with the disposal of hazardous wastes.

The Federal Government's proposed National Waste Minimisation and Recycling Strategy will establish a long-term waste minimalisation and management strategy for Australia. The strategy is expected to be finalised by May 1992 and will be administered by the newly created Commonwealth Environment Protection Agency (CEPA), which will oversee both compliance with and the operation of the strategy in co-ordination with the States and Territories.

The proposed strategy contains an overall target for the reduction of waste going to landfill and specific targets for the recycling of materials such as plastics, glass, paper and aluminium cans. The strategy will set up a national framework to minimise waste at source, including measures to help industry modernise production processes, increase research into technologies that minimise waste, and the establishment of national databases to monitor waste generation and pollution emissions. Other proposed actions are the development and implementation, in consultation with interested parties, of guidelines for waste audits, waste management plans, planning procedures, and national waste minimisation and recycling standards.

The agenda for the first meeting of parties to the Basel Convention, expected to take place in November, 1992, will include the transfer of technology to deal with waste disposal to developing countries. The high costs of environmentally acceptable disposal means that new, cleaner technologies and industrial processes are being developed to minimise the production of these wastes.

Australia is well placed to make a contribution in this area as advanced technology in this field already exists and is being currently further developed in this country. These include plasma arc, intended to decontaminate soils, and base catalysed decomposition technologies, directed at liquid waste; which are being developed as environmentally acceptable alternatives to the more traditional high temperature incineration method of disposal of hazardous and intractable waste.

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