

Sub-Regional Workshop on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs), 4–5 May 1999, Bratislava, Slovak Republic

Six countries of the Central and Eastern European region convened to exchange experiences and discuss national progress towards the establishment of Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs) during a Sub-Regional Workshop on PRTRs held in Bratislava, Slovakia, from 4–5 May 1999. The workshop was organized by the Institute of Preventive and Clinical Medicine of the Slovak Republic in collaboration with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and with financial support of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). More than 40 people took part in the two-day workshop, including participants from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russian Federation, the Slovak Republic and Ukraine, as well as representatives of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), UNITAR, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), USEPA, USAID, the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, and Mexico.

PRTRs are gaining increasing attention among countries worldwide as useful tools for tracking the amounts of potentially harmful chemical substances released into the environment and transferred off-site for disposal, and for providing access to such data to support sound environmental decision-making at all levels, including within government, by industry, and among communities and the general public. Under a PRTR scheme, data on emissions to air, water and land are typically reported by individual facilities on an annual basis for a list of specified substances. Some PRTR systems also include data on emissions from non-point or diffuse sources, such as agricultural activities and transportation. Making the information available to potential users is a key part of a PRTR programme. Experiences have shown that providing access to and actively disseminating PRTR data to all sectors of society can allow for a more informed dialogue on issues of environmental and public health protection, and can foster efforts to prevent pollution and reduce emissions and risks.

A number of countries have PRTR systems in place, such as the United States, Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and an increasing number of countries, including countries with economies in transition and industrializing countries, are considering or are in the process of establishing PRTR programmes. In addition to national considerations, some of the driving forces behind PRTR development include: Chapter 19 of Agenda 21, which calls for the establishment of emissions registers as well as community "right-to-know" and information dissemination programmes; the OECD Council Recommendation on PRTRs; the European Union Integrated Pollution Preventive and Control (IPPC) Directive which includes a PRTR component; and the recent Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters developed under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

During the workshop, the Slovak Republic reported on its progress in designing a national PRTR through a collaborative project with UNITAR, support for which is provided by the United States. A first version of the Slovak PRTR, which builds on existing information collection activities of various governmental agencies and industry, was recently completed and efforts are continuing to further develop the PRTR and ensure a legal basis for its full-scale implementation. The Czech Republic, which initiated its PRTR work in 1994 in the context of a UNITAR pilot programme, is in the process of preparing

a PRTR law based on the EU IPPC Directive. The Czech Republic also reported that it intends to lead a PRTR Task Force for the UNECE. Hungary reported on its interest to prepare a PRTR system in 1999–2000, taking into account existing environmental data collection systems and relevant national and international experiences. Although not yet pursuing a full PRTR, Poland reported that the 1998 Environmental Protection Act was amended to create province-level air pollution registers which make available air pollution information (data and permits) to the public. UNEP Chemicals reported that under a joint UNEP/Russia project implemented by the Center for International Projects in Moscow, four pilot countries were selected for establishing PRTRs, namely Kazakhstan, Russian Federation, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

The workshop was an opportunity for countries to exchange perspectives on the potential benefits and challenges of developing national PRTRs, drawing upon experiences from within the sub-region and elsewhere. Some of the key issues and principles raised throughout the workshop which participants highlighted as particularly important include, inter alia: the use of PRTR as a tool for implementing right-to-know; the value of active dissemination of PRTR data as opposed to simply providing passive access; the value of requiring self-reporting by polluters; the important role of the public and other users of PRTR data as "watchdogs" to promote environmental improvements; the need for a confidentiality provision to protect justifiable trade secrets within limited and well defined parameters; the potential for PRTR to serve as a basis for streamlining and integrating existing reporting requirements; and the potential value of PRTR to industry as an aid in identifying opportunities for cost savings and improving environmental performance. Participants also noted the importance of designing PRTRs that include specific chemical substances; require regular and periodic reporting by individual facilities; cover releases to air, water, land and off-site transfers; use common identifiers (e.g. for chemicals and facilities) to facilitate comparative analyses and other uses of the data; and are sufficiently flexible to allow the system to be adapted to evolving needs and priorities.

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