Victory! Endosulfan slated for global ban

In Geneva on April 29, the infamous pesticide endosulfan was added to the list of Persistent Organic Pollutants scheduled for worldwide phase-out. The decision rewarded PAN's 17 year campaign to get the major POPs pesticides banned everywhere. ***Kristin Schafer*** *and* ***Karl Tupper*** *from PANNA recall the Stockholm Convention's beginnings and report on the recent Conference of Parties.*

Endosulfan is a highly toxic, antiquated insecticide, and one of the last organochlorine pesticides still in use. It's so toxic that before it was recently banned across most of West Africa, every year it killed dozens of cotton farmers by accidental poisoning. Epidemiological studies link chronic exposure to autism[1], delayed puberty[2], and birth defects of the male reproductive system[3]. And it's also a persistent organic pollutant[4] — it sticks around in the environment long after it's been applied, it accumulates in organisms and across food chains[5], and it travels the globe and contaminates ecosystems far from where it's used[6].

Thanks to the hard work of PAN and our partners around the globe, momentum for a ban has been steadily growing. Just a few years ago the number of countries which had banned or were phasing out endosulfan stood at a few dozen. In the week before the Conference of Parties (CoP), it had already been eliminated or put onto a phase-out track in more than 80 countries, with Mozambique the latest to join the list. Several countries still using endosulfan have indicated privately that they want to stop, and are hoping for a ban under the Stockholm Convention.

Still, pesticide companies in India, which produces more endosulfan than any other country, had been bombarding the media and sympathetic government officials with misinformation, pulling out all stops to keep it on the market. They argued the Stockholm Convention review process had been compromised and that banning endosulfan was an EU conspiracy to get a generic pesticide off the market to increase the market share of patented insecticides. They overstated its importance to farmers and grossly exaggerated sales figures. They described it as 'soft on bees,' and extraordinarily claimed it had no health effects on humans. Ironically, on-the-ground evidence of health impacts is particularly dramatic in India where three states have already banned use of the chemical. The use of endosulfan on cashew plantations in Kerala caused terrible suffering there, leaving thousands with birth defects, developmental delays, and other maladies.

Table 1. Specific exemptions of the endosulfan listing

Crop	Pest
Cotton	Cotton bollworms, pink bollworms, aphids, jassids, whiteflies, thrips, leafroller
Jute	Bihar hairy caterpillar, yellow mites
Coffee	Berry borer, stem borer
Tea	Aphids, caterpillars, tea mosquito bugs, mealybugs, scale insects, thrips, flushworm, smaller green leaf hopper, tea geometrid
Tobacco	Oriental tobacco bud worm, aphids
Cow peas, beans, tomato	Whiteflies, aphids, leaf miner
Okra, tomato, eggplant	Fruit and shoot borer, diamondback moth, aphids, jassids
Onion, potato, chillies	Aphids, jassids
Apple	Yellow aphids
Mango	Hopper and fruitflies
Gram, arhar	Aphids, caterpillar, podborer, pea semilooper
Maize	Aphids, stem borer, pink borer
Paddy/rice	White jassids, stem borer, gall midge, rice hispa
Wheat	Aphids, termites, pink borer
Groundnuts	Aphids
Mustard	Aphids, gall midge

The endgame for endosulfan

Staff scientist Karl Tupper represented PAN North America in a strong team of environmental health advocates at the 5th official POPs meeting in Geneva in late April, where the last major POPs pesticide was listed for phase-out.

Endosulfan has been winding its way through the Convention's evaluation process for several years now. It was first proposed for listing in 2007, but consideration was immediately postponed for a year. When the Convention's expert committee finally took up the matter, India nearly ground deliberations to halt by constantly raising specious scientific and procedural objections. The committee's review is a three stage process, with each part taking a year. At each stage India forced the committee to vote on whether to move endosulfan to the next phase, and each year India was the sole Party to object. In the end, the committee agreed that endosulfan was a persistent organic pollutant that threatened human health or the environment and that global action was necessary. In the Autumn of 2010, they recommended a global ban with time limited exemptions for certain uses, and this is exactly what the CoP agreed to impose during April's Geneva meeting.

Given India's position and tactics in previous meetings, many civil society campaigners expected that they would block consensus and force the meeting to a vote — something unprecedented for the CoP. If the Parties voted, they surely would have voted in favour of a ban, but it is an open question as to whether they would actually take a vote, given all countries' deep resistance to voting.

While the Indian endosulfan industry did indeed continue in this manner during the CoP, the Indian government seemed to turn a corner, and waver in their opposition to a ban. Early on, they appeared to be resigned to a global phase-out, and were talking about exemptions and financial assistance for implementing alternatives. And in the end, they agreed to add endosulfan to the Convention on the condition that certain time-limited specific exemptions were allowed.

Global civil society campaign

Two things were critical in bringing India around. One was a pledge from developed countries to provide financial assistance to developing countries for phasing in alternatives as endosulfan is phased out. But that was always in the offing — few decisions taken don't come with money for developing countries. But the other factor, and the one which we think pushed India over the edge, is the massive global campaign mounted by civil society groups around the world —

Indigenous peoples, the International POPs Elimination Network, PAN groups on five continents, and especially our colleagues in India. In the run-up to Geneva, Indian activists and PAN partners everywhere campaigned to shame their government into supporting the listing.

As the opening gavel fell in Geneva on 25 April, VS Achuthanandan, the Chief Minister of the state of Kerala, a state particularly hard hit by endosulfan impacts, led a fast against endosulfan. All week long — and in the months leading up the meeting — activists in India have been staging actions, talking to the media, and petitioning the government calling for a national ban and for India to support a global ban. And on the last day of the CoP, there was a general strike in Kerala to support a ban.

Thanks to these resourceful and persistent activists, and in particular Jayan Chelaton from Thanal, a PAN partner group based in Kerala, India could no longer insist on continuing to use endosulfan. As Jayan said in our joint press release:

'This is the moment we have been dreaming of. The tears of the mothers of the endosulfan victims cannot be remedied, but it will be a relief to them that there will not be any more people exposed to this toxic insecticide. It is a good feeling for them. We are happy to note that this is also victory for poor farmers, as this proves people united from all over the world can get what they demand.'

PAN International display at the recent Stolkholm Convention meeting *Photo: PAN International*

Ensuring the treaty lives up to its promise

Today, 173 countries are members of the POPs treaty (the US is not among them). The initial list of 12 chemicals targeted for action has expanded to 22, and countries are making real progress implementing the treaty.

Yet the pace of action is agonisingly slow. PAN and our partners continue to press governments to pick up the pace, and to resist pressure from corporate interests to weaken the treaty with loopholes and delays. Indigenous peoples from the Arctic are especially concerned and engaged, as their traditional foods continue to be among the most contaminated with harmful chemicals – chemicals that migrate to the Arctic from elsewhere on the planet.

The final decision has a few loopholes (they almost always do) allowing endosulfan to be used in certain situations for the next six years. The loopholes ('specific exemptions' in the language of the treaty) were a necessary, if unfortunate, compromise needed to get India to agree to the ban. The exemptions are for specific crop/pest combinations. For example, while most uses for endosulfan will end next year, use will be allowed to continue on coffee for five more years, but only against coffee berry borers and leaf borers. Parties who intend to make use of the exemptions are required to notify the Secretariat of their intention to do this.

Still, most uses will end next summer, with a short list winding down through 2017. And then that is it: no more endosulfan. PAN will watchdog the endosulfan phase-out as we press for full and rapid implementation of this powerful treaty. Right now, we celebrate a milestone victory.

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Why the POPs treaty matters - one mother's view

I couldn't take nine-month-old Connor with me when I attended my first POPs treaty meeting in Bonn in March 2000, so I took my breastmilk pump instead. I vividly remember struggling with my rusty German to convince the women in the conference center kitchen to store my milk in the deep freeze.

The POPs treaty is officially known as the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. It's a completely unprecedented international agreement designed to rid the world of an entire class of chemicals that scientists and the global community agree are just too dangerous to have on the planet.

These 'POPs' are frighteningly long-lasting (persisting for decades), concentrate up the food chain (building up in higher-level predators like humans) and travel the globe (settling in the Arctic, where levels in human tissue are astonishingly high). They're also known to harm human health. As a nursing mother, participating in the POPs treaty meetings took on a very personal dimension: human milk — nature's perfect food for infants — is at the very top of the food chain.

PAN has been pressing for action on persistent chemicals since the early 1980s. The global network's initial 'Dirty Dozen' campaign targeted many of the same chemicals now listed for global action under the POPs treaty. PAN experts, including Dr. Romeo Quijano of PAN Philippines and PAN North America colleagues, Dr. Marcia Ishii-Eiteman and founder Monica Moore, were directly involved in advocating for a global POPs treaty in the mid-1990s.

My breastmilk pump has long since been retired, but decisions made in Bonn back in 2000 — and at meetings that followed in Johannesburg and Geneva — resulted in a global agreement designed to ensure that mothers around the world would pass fewer persistent chemicals along to their nursing infants. This is a very good thing. Experts agree that breastmilk remains, hands down, the best food for infants, even with widespread presence of POPs. Yet breastfed infants are now likely to be even healthier as their mothers' milk becomes less compromised with chemicals. **Kristin Schafer**