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COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE TRANSPORT OF DANGEROUS GOODS

Sub-Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods
(Thirteenth session,
Geneva, 7-17 July 1997,
agenda item (5 (a))

GLOBAL HARMONIZATION OF SYSTEMS OF CLASSIFICATION AND LABELLING OF CHEMICALS

General

Report on the Second Session of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety

Transmitted by the Expert of the United States of America

The second session of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS) was held in Ottawa, Canada from 10 to 14 February 1997. Participants included delegates from 83 countries, 18 non-governmental organizations and 11 intergovernmental organizations. The agenda for the meeting included a broad range of chemical safety issues including:

- International assessment of chemical risks
- Harmonization of classification and labelling chemicals
- Information exchange on toxic chemicals and chemical risks
- Establishment of risk education programmes
- Strengthening of national capabilities and capacities for management of chemicals and emergency issues

Of particular interest to the UN Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods (UN CETDG) and the International Maritime Organization DSC Sub-Committee was the issue of Harmonization of Classification and Labelling.

Three papers provided the basis for discussion of this agenda item:

(1) Progress made toward a Globally Harmonized System (GHS) for the classification and labelling of chemicals (IFCS/FORUM-II/97.12w Rev.1).

(2) Harmonization of classification and labelling of chemicals, progress report on the ongoing technical work.

(3) THOUGHT STARTER on International Instrument for a Globally Harmonized System (GHS) for the classification and labelling of chemicals.

Discussion on Document (1)

In document (1) the IOMC Coordinating Group for the Harmonization of Chemical Classification Systems (CG/HCCS) responded to instructions given at the Second Intersessional Group Meeting (ISG-2) of the IFCS held in Canberra, Australia in 1996. It was reported that work on harmonization of classification criteria was proceeding at the UN CETDG and OECD, and that completion of harmonized criteria would likely occur in late 1997. The IOMC CG/HCCS itself had begun work on classifying mixtures on the basis of a U.S. document summarizing existing methodologies. This document is being considered by the various stakeholders. An inventory report on hazard communication (labelling and safety data sheets) is also under development.

In response to a request from ISG-2 the IOMC CG/HCCS provided a clarification of the scope of the harmonization effort. However, based on comments from a number of delegates it was agreed that the clarification should be considered further in the light of concerns expressed about the application of the criteria to certain groups of chemicals. (i.e., food additions and pharmaceuticals).

It was also reported that in order to increase awareness the CG/HCCS was creating a web page on the Internet.

Document (1) -Specifically asked that the IFCS take action on the following points:

(a) To indicate whether the harmonized criteria should be implemented through either a binding or non-binding instrument;
(b) Recommend strong national coordination;
(c) Recommend that countries assign high priority to the work;
(d) Recommend that increased resources be applied to completing this work.

The IFCS supported the development of a non binding instrument although it was agreed that this should not rule out the development of a binding instrument further into the future.
The IFCS also endorsed points (b), (c) and (d).

Document (2) - No specific discussion was held on this document.

Document (3) - This document was prepared by this UK with the intent of initiating discussion on how the harmonized criteria could be implemented as an international non binding instrument. The specific proposal in the UK papers was to reorganize the UN Committee into two sub-committees including one specifically dealing with global harmonization of classification and labelling and a second one dealing with transport issues. Both sub-committees would be under a single Committee. In its introduction of the paper, the UK stated that it's proposal was an example of how this GHS might be implemented and maintained. The U.K. proposal was based on the constraints of countries not wanting to develop a costly binding instrument and not wanting to establish a new international organization.

The U.K. suggested that this proposal, along with others that might be developed, be considered by the IOMC in its deliberations on how to implement and maintain a non binding instrument. A number of delegates spoke in favor of the proposed U.K. approach and spoke favorable of the work of the UN CETDG. It was agreed that the U.K. paper along with a U.S. paper submitted to ISG-2 be considered by IOMC CG/HCCS.