
The Basel Convention and Its Mobile Phone Partnership Initiative (MPPI)

The global environmental treaty known as the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal was adopted in response to concerns about escalating shipments of hazardous wastes from developed to developing countries. The treaty aims to reduce the generation of hazardous wastes and to minimize their shipment to the developing world. A primary goal is the “environmentally sound management” of hazardous wastes to protect human health and the environment. The Convention contains lists of wastes that are hazardous and establishes controls on their shipment. Among the wastes defined as hazardous are circuit boards containing lead-based solder, used in most mobile phones.

The Basel Convention was adopted in 1989. It has been signed by 158 countries and was ratified and went into effect in 1992. The United States, Afghanistan, and Haiti have signed but not ratified the Convention. The US participates in Basel initiatives as a signatory but not as a party to the treaty. The Convention is administered by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and is implemented by a secretariat located in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Mobile Phone Partnership Initiative

As the Basel Convention entered its second decade, the parties to the treaty decided to form partnerships with industry to create innovative approaches to environmentally sound management of end-of-life products. The first product chosen was mobile phones (also known as cell phones). The Mobile Phone Partnership Initiative (MPPI) was launched in

December 2002 and is expected to be a model for future partnerships between the Basel Convention and industry.

The world’s leading mobile phone manufacturers are participating in the MPPI, including Matsushita (Panasonic), Mitsubishi, Motorola, NEC, Nokia, Philips, Samsung, Siemens, and Sony Ericsson. Participating countries include Belarus, Canada, China, the Czech Republic, Germany, Japan, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, and the US. Other countries continue to join the project.

Many factors contributed to the selection of mobile phones as the focus of the first partnership. Principal among them are rapidly rising waste generation rates for these products, which have become a global concern. Mobile phones are generally used for a very short time before being replaced. Meanwhile, the number of users worldwide continues to grow, from 16 million in 1991 to over 1 billion in 2002. Mobile phones also contain numerous toxic substances, including lead, beryllium, and brominated flame retardants, which can pollute the air when burned in incinerators and leach into soil and drinking waters when buried in landfills. In addition, many of the hundreds of millions of phones retired each year — both refurbished models exported for sale and discarded phones exported for recycling and disposal — end up in developing countries, where little or no infrastructure is in place to ensure that they are processed and ultimately managed in a manner that protects public health and the environment. Finally, since all of the relatively small number of major mobile phone manufacturers were willing to participate, the chances were good that the partnership would succeed.

A Mobile Phone Working Group was established consisting of the participating countries, the manufacturers noted above, and members of the Secretariat. The working group developed a work program consisting of four major projects:

1. Reuse of used mobile phones
2. Collection and transboundary movement of used mobile phones
3. Recovery and recycling of end-of-life mobile phones
4. Awareness raising and training

Project 4 includes four subcategories. Three are focusing on promoting awareness and training on cell phone reuse, collection, and recycling/recovery. The fourth focuses on mobile phone design and use.

The goals of working group are to:

- Achieve better product stewardship.
- Influence consumers toward more environmentally friendly behavior.
- Promote the best refurbishing/recycling/disposal options.
- Mobilize political and institutional support for environmentally sound management of mobile phones.
- Create an initiative that could be replicated to build new public/private partnerships for the environmentally sound management of hazardous and other waste streams.

MPPI Timetable and Implementation

The project on design and use was the first get under way, followed by the project on recycling/recovery. It is anticipated that all projects will result in written reports. For example, the group working on design will submit a report that addresses the history of design changes for mobile phones; design strategies now being implemented by industry to comply with the EU

electronics directives and other forces; and recommendations for future design changes that can facilitate end-of-life management that protects human health and the environment. The first reports are due for completion in early 2004. The goal is to complete all projects by the end of 2004.

Some participating countries have volunteered to lead the different projects. The project on design and use is being led by the US (the US Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Solid Waste). The project on recycling/recovery is being led by the US and Switzerland; the project on the collection and transboundary movement of mobile phones is being led by South Korea.

Participation in the Mobile Phone Working Group is limited to industry (primarily manufacturers), individual countries, and members of the Basel secretariat. Nongovernmental organizations and academics are not permitted to participate in the working group but are participating in the project groups. INFORM, along with manufacturers, recyclers, trade associations, and academics, is participating in the project on design and use.