

Draft speech by Danish Minister for the Environment Hans Christian Schmidt at the opening of EPER at the European Environment Agency, 23 February 2004.

The European Pollutant Emission Register EPER - putting the Aarhus Convention into practice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Danish Government, it is my pleasure to welcome you all to Copenhagen.

Opening of the EPER

The opening of the "European Pollutant Emission Register" - EPER - is a very important step forward for European environmental policies.

Making the environmental impacts from our largest enterprises known to the general public is crucial to the openness and public participation called for in the Aarhus Convention.

And -as you will know -, the perspective reaches beyond the EU to our neighbours and partners to the East. Countries that we have been working with in the Pan-European framework to enhance the protection of the environment.

I thank everybody in business and government for the hard work that has been done to

- gather the necessary information in the EPER, and
- make it accessible to all of us by a few clicks of the mouse.

Opening of the Danish register

I am happy to add, that in Denmark, we have used the opportunity to open a Danish register with information on the environmental performance of our own major companies.

Some of you will know, that Danish firms have worked with so-called "Green Accounting" for some years.

Now, we have created a new register of our own on the basis of the information in these "green accounts".

It provides a simple access to information by allowing users to search systematically, and it contains some additional information as compared to the EPER. Links to our central enterprise register, for example.

To begin with, you can find information from 158 of our largest firms in the register and it will be expanded in the future.

Access to Information

The EPER is an EU-wide register with environmental information on the largest of the companies that are being regulated by the EU-Directive on "Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control" (IPPC).

It is expected that the firms in the register will represent 90% of the point-source pollution from these companies.

From this day forward, you have access to information on all of these plants and their emissions of a number of substances.

You can search for information on companies in your neighbourhood or across the entire EU

Public access to information on the environmental performance of the individual enterprise is at the very heart of the register.

It is a basic part of the EU-implementation of the Aarhus Convention on the right of access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters.

Parties to the Convention are required to establish a system containing information about releases and transfers of a number of specified substances.

That is, what EPER does: It makes the pollution caused by large industrial firms visible to the general public. And this - in turn - will lead to environmental improvement.

Why? Because focussing on environmental performance makes companies themselves interested in improvements.

This is the clear message from our experience with "Green Accounting" in Denmark:

Improving your environmental track record has clear benefits

- in the shape of savings in resources and energy, and
- in the shape. of goodwill from the local community, business partners and
- investors. in the shape of better relations to public authorities.

At present, we are remaking our environmental control in Denmark to make it even more worth while for companies to improve their environmental performance on their own accord. This is done by loosening up on the bureaucratic demands on well-performing firms.

All in all, the openness that will be created by EPER will:

- enhance public interest and understanding of the environmental problems,
- encourage dialogue between business and the community at large, and
- promote the exchange of experience between companies on how to improve their performance.

Towards Sustainability

The drive towards sustainable production and consumption means increasing demands on industry

- to cut down emissions,
- to develop cleaner products and production methods,
- to recycle, and

- to minimise the use of natural resources and energy.

This means a growing need to document the environmental performance -to neighbours, costumers, business partners and investors.

EPER will assist in supplying qualified information to serve these relations.

And it will combine well with market based instruments:

- ECO-labelling such as the EU-Flower, and
- Certification such as ISO 14001 or the European EMAS.

The PRTR Protocol

In Kiev, last year, at the Pan-European Conference of Environment Ministers, hosted by Ukraine in May, we signed a protocol under the Aarhus Convention on "Pollutant Release and Transfer."

The PRTR Protocol was signed by 36 countries and, the EU, and it covers the production that is most important to the environment and 86 pollutants, -including greenhouse gases.

The Protocol is the result of more than two years of negotiations between countries, industry, and NGOs.

It is the first internationally agreed standard for making information on releases and transfers of pollutants publicly available on the Internet.

And the signing of the protocol means, that countries as far away as the central Asian republics will develop registers similar to the EPER.

Access to information on the environment will be a significant step towards creating and implementing modern environmental standards in many of these countries.

At the same time, it will be an important experience in active participation and democratic decision-making.

The PRTR Protocol is a great success: -a useful tool for making environmental progress.

It is open to all countries, and you don't have to sign the Aarhus Convention to participate. I hope that many countries will use this opportunity.

There goes a lot of effort into gathering and producing the environmental information; -and it is important, that you make full use of it by making it available for everybody.

Future work

The opening of EPER is a clear signal

- that the EU-countries are implementing the protocol,
- that we are willing to share our experience, and
- that we will assist other countries in making similar progress.

The next step will be to expand the information on waste. Minimising waste is one of our great challenges. Better information on the production of waste will enhance the value of EPER and contribute to a more efficient use of resources.

I look forward to future cooperation with the business community and the NGOs on the refinement and further development of this important instrument for environmental policies and sustainable development.

I encourage the citizens of Europe, the business community and public authorities to use the EPER in their efforts to improve the environment.

My sincere congratulations to everybody involved in the creation of the EPER. I wish you all the best of luck in your future work.

Thank you, for your attention.