

Launch of the European Pollutant Emission Register

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Good morning. Thank you very much for your kind hospitality and invitation to this launch. I am very pleased to represent the environmental NGO sector here and join in the celebrations around the launch of the European Pollutant Emission Register (EPER). This does mark a milestone in Europe and to see data from sixteen countries in this direct way on the web site, both at the individual facility level and nation-wide information, is very worthwhile.

I hope you will forgive me if I recall that it is nine years since Friends of the Earth first put this sort of information onto the internet, using point and click maps of England and Wales. It was fairly basic then, but that work and our later versions of the site allow me to appreciate the work that has gone into the EPER web site, so congratulations to everyone. Using maps to turn what might be bewildering amounts of international data into locally relevant information for the user is very welcome.

But let's look forward. Of course I have to mention that I look forward to EPER developing into a more comprehensive Pollutant Release and Transfer Register to at least the minimum standards of the Aarhus Convention Protocol (Kiev, 2003). That will be another milestone and will hugely improve this register. And maybe some countries will be bold enough to continue developing it, even beyond the Protocol, such as by investigating ways of measuring pollutants in waste, or measures of productivity so that we can really get a handle on bench-marking of performance amongst a sector.

But here's my first wish for EPER. I wish for this to be really visible to the public. It is absolutely crucial that this data is used and that means raising awareness. It is my firm belief that we will get the most out of EPER and similar pollution inventories if we work at involving the public. And while I believe that the public is a very wide range of people with all sorts of relevant expertise, I'd like to talk about taking EPER to the general public in particular.

From experience in many countries, it is clear that pollution inventories are not just for the authorities – even though of course they can be very useful tools for monitoring performance. They are not just for regulators to keep an eye on industry. They are not just for pollution abatement specialists and environmental managers – although let's hope that they see the challenges for improving industrial processes. They are not just for environmental NGOs to make a point about failures of policy and environmental degradation. They are also for citizens who live next door to a landfill site or incinerator, they are for those whose children go to school facing onto a landscape of steel works, they are for people who fish in a local river and think the water could be cleaner. And many more who care about their local environment. These people have a right to know about pollution, and a right to get involved in the issues. We should use EPER to support environmental democracy in action.

In the US it has been reported that literally thousands of community projects of one sort or another have their roots in the Toxics Release Inventory programme. I hope

that we can see such enthusiastic uptake in Europe – but we may have to work at it. Now EPER is not as complicated and extensive as TRI data (although one day I hope it will have similar scope) but a lot of effort was made in the US to spread the word. The information was available in a multitude of formats, summary reports were prepared and it was made available in public libraries. There were training sessions on how to use the data. This even led to “Data Use” conferences which were organised for users to share ideas and experiences of their projects.

This has led to a very dynamic and evolving programme – for example, although the original list of substances was short (only 350 substances!) popular demand meant that the list has been substantially increased, although some substances have also dropped off the list. Other refinements have been made in response to users’ experiences.

We might need to think about the needs of the general public, or indeed ask them. I certainly don’t think I’ve got all the answers, but I do know that the first question is often: “What does this mean for my health?”. Not easy to answer for the long-term situation, but maybe we should start to link these data sets with air quality information? Can we develop indicators that start to make sense of one tonne of benzene here, but 20 tonnes of ethylene dichloride there? I certainly hope that the register can be developed in such directions. Maybe there can be presentation of EPER at the Budapest Health and Environment Ministerial conference this year to stimulate discussion.

Another key issue for the public is already being addressed I see – and I very much welcome that the web site will be available in all EU languages in the future. I would also like to see more national web sites that can help to give more context for the data.

Whilst internet access has arrived and grown enormously since the early days of the TRI, we could still learn from the energy and enthusiasm that went into dissemination of the TRI. Outreach programmes to involve students, workers, the public living in the vicinity of industrial sites will pay dividends in encouraging pollution prevention and better health and environment by involving many sectors of society. I hope that in the future we will see many groups engaging with this information, and maybe a “Data Users” conference might be convened in one of the EU countries.

THANK YOU.