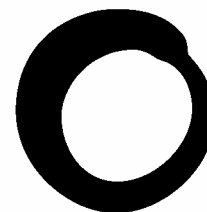


# Briefing Note



**Friends of  
the Earth**

## **Ghost fleet ships, toxicity and PCBs - key facts**

### **Background on PCBs**

- PCBs are chemicals used in manufacturing a wide variety of products in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s – including in ships in cabling, gaskets, insulation and buildings.
- Bans on using PCBs began in the 1970s – they are recognised as one of the 12 most toxic groups of chemicals worldwide.
- PCBs are no longer manufactured and are subject to international agreements on their destruction because they are now known to be highly toxic and long-lived.
- The European Commission says PCBs are probable human carcinogens and produce adverse effects in animals and there is scientific concern about their negative effects on human health and on the environment.
- Both European and Domestic laws mean PCBs can't be disposed of without legal permission.<sup>1</sup>
- The UK Environment Agency<sup>2</sup> has said PCBs are toxic to fish and other aquatic organisms and that there is evidence linking PCBs with reproductive and immuno-toxic effects in wildlife, including effects on seals and mink.
- The contract between the American government and Able UK says that much of the PCBs in the ghost fleet are intended to be disposed of in UK landfill.
- The Government consultation document on PCBs and dioxins says PCBs will be released to the atmosphere from landfills and around 2kg of PCBs are released into the air every year from Britain's biggest factories.
- No estimate has been carried out into how much of the 700,000kg of PCBs will be released from the Hartlepool landfill and over what time.

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## **PCBs in the ghost fleet**

- A 2003 study carried out for by Able UK<sup>3</sup> shows the 13 ships destined for the UK in total hold almost 700,000kg of PCBs - a significant quantity.
- Many of the chemicals contained in the structure of the ghost fleet are officially classified as Toxic Waste and legally must be disposed of in an official Toxic Waste Dump.
- It is illegal to for America to export PCBs – whether liquid or solid. In this case the US Maritime Administration (MARAD) had to get a guarantee from the US Environment Protection Agency that it wouldn't prosecute if the "ghost fleet" was sent to Able UK in Hartlepool. The US granted the Exemption on 22 May 2003.
- Normally it is illegal to import asbestos into the UK. The UK Health and Safety Executive granted an Exemption (for all practical purposes) on 25 July 2003.
- The US Maritime Administration (MARAD) has said the ships have hazardous substances in their structure and pose an immediate environmental threat.
- The ships have been described as an "environmental time bomb" by the Governor of Virginia, Mark Warner (2002).

## **International efforts to destroy PCBs**

- In just over a year (2005) a new European law will ban the import of PCB waste such as the US "ghost fleet" ships because of their toxicity — regardless of whether the waste is intended for disposal or recycling.
- The law will bring into force an international treaty – the Stockholm Convention.
- The Stockholm Convention bans waste (including waste ships) contaminated with PCBs being imported to the UK unless coming from a country that does not have and can't reasonably acquire the technical facilities to dispose of hazardous waste in an environmentally sound manner. That is not the case with the USA.
- The Stockholm Convention also bans the production of the 12 most toxic groups of chemicals worldwide (including PCBs).
- The UK and USA signed the Treaty in 2001. It is expected that the Treaty will become international law by the end of 2004 when the fiftieth country ratifies the Treaty.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., Council Directive 96/59/EC on the disposal of polychlorinated biphenyls and polychlorinated terphenyls (PCB/PCT); and The Environmental Protection (Disposal of Polychlorinated Biphenyls and other Dangerous Substances) (England and Wales) Regulations 2000

<sup>2</sup> Environment Agency Pollution Inventory fact-sheet

<sup>3</sup> Marine Risk Assessment for Post-service Remediation Partners (now a subsidiary of Able UK) by Det Norske Veritas, Sept 2003