

Substances that deplete the ozone layer

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The committee adopted the report of Mrs; GRAENITZ on substances that deplete the ozone layer - harming human health and damaging terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. The depletion of the ozone layer is leading to an increase in ultraviolet radiation on earth, causing immune system disorders, increased skin cancer, eye problems and damage to terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Cases of skin cancer in Europe are rising by 8% a year. Although the 1987 Montreal Convention on ozone-depleting substances has led to an 80% reduction in the global consumption of such substances, increasing numbers of scientists fear that the depletion of the ozone layer will not peak until 2020. Over the past two years alone, the size of the ozone hole has grown by between a fifth and a quarter. The report by Mrs Ilona GRAENITZ (PES, A) amended a Commission proposal for a new Council regulation on ozone depleting substances replacing Regulation 3093/94. The four substances targeted are: hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs, used in fridges and air conditioning systems, as solvents and in the production of polystyrene foam); methyl bromide (Mbr, a highly toxic pesticide, which is also used for fumigation and as a feedstock for the manufacture of medicines and chemicals); chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs, production of which was halted in the EU in 1995); and halons (subject to an EU production ban since 1994 but still useful in firefighting). Alternatives to these substances are normally available and are, overall, cheaper. The committee amendments generally shorten the proposed timetable for phasing out these substances (ending their production, marketing or use). Member States are urged to consider helping SMEs to this end. In an attempt to combat the considerable illegal trade in the substances, which are still used in out-of-date installations, Member States are urged to carry out random checks on imports. The committee also wants an eventual end to HCFC exports from the EU to those countries which still permit them. However, it also supports the continuation of exemptions for critical or essential uses, with derogations being granted mainly for medical uses or to produce chemical precursors for pharmaceuticals and also (in the case of Mbr) in order to tackle emergencies involving sudden outbreaks of pest or plant diseases.