



Industry claim on climate change gas containment disproved

Brussels, 25 February 2004 - A study released today shows that HFC-134a, a fluorinated greenhouse gas 1,300 times more potent than carbon dioxide (CO₂), leaks from refrigeration and air conditioning equipment at the same rate as the ozone-depleting – and now banned - CFCs used to. This shatters industry claims that leak rates had been cut dramatically. Such claims were used to head off limitations on HFCs under the proposed EU Regulation on Fluorinated Gases.

This Regulation, scheduled for a vote in the European Parliament's environment committee on 15 March, gives priority to the containment of HFCs rather than to their replacement by climate-friendly alternatives in the applications where these are already readily available. Today's report calls such a strategy into question.

The report, *HFC containment has already failed*, by chemist Eric Johnson, who edits the leading journal on environmental impact assessmentⁱ, indicates that HFC-134a from automobile air conditioning has continued to leak at around 25-30% annually over the past decade. This contradicts claims by the auto industry that the leakage rates have averaged 10-15% over the same period, with newer equipment leaking even less.

Remarkably, Johnson's conclusions are drawn from a study funded by the fluorocarbon industryⁱⁱ. "The relative rate of loss has remained similar" for CFC-12 and HFC-134a, that report states. These findings fit with data showing that atmospheric HFC-134a concentrations have soared.

"HFCs can and should be replaced with climate-friendly alternatives," states Mahi Sideridou, Greenpeace's EU climate policy director, "The European Parliament must reject the Commission's strategy and endorse phase-out dates for HFCs in refrigeration and in air conditioning."

HFCs were forwarded as replacements to CFCs to avoid destruction of the ozone layer. CFCs were also potent greenhouse gases. "The irony is that they're solving one problem while ignoring the other," says CAN Europe's Jason Anderson. "Projections by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change show that the global warming impact from HFCs could skyrocket in the coming decades, exceeding the levels of damage from CFCs. This is precisely the period when Europe has to be slashing its greenhouse gas emissions by 60% or more to help avoid devastating global climate change."

The Parliament's Environment Committee is considering options to reduce emissions from mobile air conditioning that would do away with HFCs in favour of alternatives. "Unfortunately, some parliamentarians have been taken in by talk of low leakage HFC systems and proposed to delay or even cancel the switch," says Anderson. "This would be a major mistake: these emissions are the fastest growing source of greenhouse gases in the EU - every year of delay means 40 million tonnes of additional carbon dioxide emissions from this source alone, which is about equivalent to Ireland's annual carbon dioxide emissions. These gases have to be eliminated – not just 'contained'."

Measures for stationary applications (like refrigeration and stationary air conditioning) are even less progressive, with containment being the only policy for all but a handful of cases. It is particularly shocking that the Regulation does not phase out HFCs in domestic refrigeration, since the EU market is already dominated by the environmentally friendly alternative, hydrocarbon technology. Member States like Denmark and Austria have already passed laws to phase-out HFCs and major commercial equipment users like Coca-Cola, Unilever and McDonald's have committed to do the same.

"The EU risks passing a Regulation on climate change that would roll back environmental standards in certain member states as well as freezing out progress on alternatives in major applications. We shouldn't stand around and watch HFCs leak, we should get rid of them," says Sideridou.

Web page for more information:

www.climnet.org/Euenergy/fgas.html

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ⁱ Environmental Impact Assessment Review

ⁱⁱ McCulloch, A., P. Midgley and P. Ashford. Releases of refrigerant gases (CFC-12, HCFC-22 and HFC-134a) to the atmosphere. *Atmospheric Environment* 37 (2003) 889-902.