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## Sandoz chemical spill 25 years on Never again a Rhine as red as blood

**25 years ago, in November 1986, one of the biggest chemical accidents caused by man in the history of Europe unfolded. After a fire at the plants of the Swiss chemicals company Sandoz 20 tonnes of toxic red-coloured extinguishing foam was dumped into the Rhine. Massive dying of fish was the result; virtually the entire eel population was wiped out. In commemoration of the disaster, the Federal Ministry of Environment (BMU), the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) and the UNECE are holding an international workshop on risk management at high-risk installations. "The Sandoz disaster serves as a constant reminder to be earnest about close international cooperation when transboundary hazardous incidents occur. Good crisis management in an accident is vital, especially since several international rivers run through Germany," said Jochen Flasbarth, President of UBA. "High standards must be maintained within the European Union (EU), and authorisation and monitoring systems outside the EU must be improved." The workshop will seek to identify any existing deficits in risk management at high-risk installations.**

The Sandoz disaster started when 1350 tonnes of highly toxic chemicals suddenly went up in flames at one of the company's warehouses. Although the fire services responded immediately and extinguished the fire, more than 20 tonnes of a toxic pesticide mix flowed unhindered with the fire water into the Rhine. In the following two weeks the spill spread more than 400 kilometres downriver, destroying practically the entire eel population in its path. In the Netherlands, which at the time extracted some of its drinking water through bank filtration along the Rhine, supply was severely impaired. German authorities could do little more than look on helplessly, for although the accident occurred directly at the German-Swiss border, there was no exchange of information between the two countries.

Lessons were learned from the disaster. Since the Sandoz accident there have been great improvements in risk management, made possible in particular by national and international regulations. The most important include the Hazardous Accidents Ordinance (*StörfallV*) and the EU Seveso II Directive, aimed at improving control of major-accident hazards involving dangerous substances. In addition, proposals made by international river area commissions have led to improvements in safety technology at industrial plants in combination with effective monitoring. Water pollution of the Rhine as a result of accidents has since decreased by more than 99 percent, which - although positive - has unfortunately not been matched by all the other river catchment areas in the UNECE region. They are in areas within Europe and North America as well as in Asia and states of the former USSR. The latter in particular have revealed a rather negative

trend since efficient state authorisation and controlling bodies do not as a rule exist. Moreover, bilateral or international early warning systems are in their infancy, if they exist at all. Efforts within the EU focus on securing the success achieved, which requires that adequate numbers of personnel be maintained and that technical safety standards be extended to related areas of law. Regular emergency practice drills between neighbouring states are essential to security. An example of such cooperation to be followed is the joint responsibility assumed and the quick harmonisation of technical safety measures in disaster prevention and monitoring that has occurred within European river basin commissions.

More in-depth information about the seminar and background information is available here:  
<http://www.kas-bmu.de/unece/>

Dessau-Roßlau, 8 November 2011