Michael Stanley-Jones
Environmental Information Management Officer, Aarhus Convention Secretariat
UN Economic Commission for Europe

The Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs) is the first legally binding international instrument on pollutant release and transfer registers. The Protocol was adopted at an extra-ordinary meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention on 21 May 2003. The meeting took place in the framework of the fifth 'Environment for Europe' Ministerial Conference, Kiev, 21-23 May 2003.

The UNECE region is a diverse region and includes the developed countries of North America and western Europe, as well as many countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Representatives from all sub-regions of the Economic Commission for Europe participated in negotiation of the Protocol, and it was by design made into a flexible instrument that could serve the region's diversity.

36 States and the European Community signed the Protocol in Kiev. [No North American country member has elected to sign the Protocol.] All States can participate in the Protocol, including those which had not ratified the Convention and those which are not members of the Economic Commission for Europe. It is by design an 'open' international instrument.

The Protocol's objective is "to enhance public access to information through the establishment of coherent, nationwide pollutant release and transfer registers (PRTRs)...".

In the preamble of the Protocol, the signatories recognized the link between adequate environmental information systems and the exercise of the rights contained in the Aarhus Convention and noted the need for cooperation with other international initiatives concerning pollutants and waste, including the Stockholm and Basel Conventions. The PRTR Protocol has great relevance to the effort to halt the illicit movement of toxic and dangerous wastes.

The Protocol requires each Party to establish a PRTR which:

§　is publicly accessible through Internet, free of charge

§　is searchable according to separate parameters (facility, pollutant, location, medium, etc.)

§　is user-friendly in its structure and provide links to other relevant registers

§　presents standardized, timely data on a structured, computerized database

§　covers releases and transfers of at least 86 pollutants covered by the Protocol, such as greenhouse gases, acid rain pollutants, ozone-depleting substances, heavy metals, and certain carcinogens, such as dioxins

§　covers releases and transfers from certain types of major point source

§ (e.g. thermal power stations, mining and metallurgical industries, chemical plants, waste and waste-water treatment plants, paper and timber industries); including in its scope activities from the energy sector, production and processing of metals, mining, the chemical industries(industrial scale production of basic organic and inorganic chemicals, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals and explosives), waste management and ship building and breaking (removal of paint)

§ accommodates available data on releases from diffuse sources (e.g. transport and agriculture)

§ has limited confidentiality provisions, and

§ allows for public participation in its development and modification.

As evidence of the public's desire to obtain PRTR information, we note the recent experience on the occasion of the launch of the European Pollutant Emissions Registers (EPER), an instrument containing some 50 chemicals. More than 2,000,000 visits were made to the web site [www.eper.cec.eu.int] shortly after its launch.

The Aarhus Convention and PRTR Protocol support establishment of information exchange and dissemination mechanisms. We are in the process of establishing national focal points and PRTR clearinghouse focal points. There is a need to link PRTRs with other emerging information systems, such as the pan-European environmental health information system being developed under the WHO. Just as the public, once it has obtained pollutant release information begins to ask "How do these chemicals affect my health?," the public having obtained environmental health information will increasingly ask "Where are the sources of environmental exposures to chemicals?"