

Ozone layer protection deal still up in the air

- Targets for global chlorofluorocarbon use
- New results could alter timetable

London

A DIFFICULT bargaining session has led to a draft international agreement on reducing the global production and consumption of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). But the 31 countries taking part in last week's conference of the Vienna Convention on the Protection of the Ozone Layer in Geneva still have some important points to work out before a protocol can be signed this autumn.

The draft text for the agreement is dotted with phrases in brackets, indicating the items still to be discussed. Several points, however, have been agreed upon, including a freeze on the production and consumption of CFCs 11, 12, and 113 at 1986 levels by 1990, followed by a reduction of 20 per cent in 1992, with scientific evidence on the relationship between CFCs and ozone damage to be reviewed in 1990 and every four years after that.

Prospects for disagreement at the conference were apparent from the beginning — the United States, Canada, Scandinavian countries, New Zealand and Australia were pushing for the total phasing-out of all harmful CFCs, while the European Economic Community had agreed only to support a 20 per cent cut-back. Now, after four days of intensive negotiations, governments will be asked to choose between two proposals for a further 30 per cent reduction of CFC production, to be imposed either in 1994 with a simple majority vote of signatories, or in 1996 unless a two-thirds majority opposes it. Further reductions beyond that are still a possibility.

Other outstanding issues for discussion concern developing countries, who want to protect their use of CFCs as refrigerants. Proposals being considered call for developing countries to be exempt from the provisions of the convention for five years, or until their annual use of CFCs reaches 0.1 kg per head of population.

The final agreement, to be presented for signature in Montreal in September, appears likely to cover CFCs 114 and 115, as well as halons. Last week's meeting generally agreed on the need to regulate halons, thought to be one of the most highly damaging substances to the ozone layer, although the Soviet delegation pointed out that halons are not CFCs and therefore could not be legally covered by the conference. Dr Mostopha Tolba, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, is to seek a

mandate from the governing council allowing halons to be included.

Inclusion of CFC 113 in the restrictions was not part of the original position of the EEC delegation, and Japan had been particularly sensitive on the issue because the substance is used as a solvent in the microchip industries. The Japanese delegation appeared to soften, however, when the wording on the reduction of CFCs was modified to include "combined" adjusted annual production; they believe that reductions of the other CFCs would offset the need for cutting back on 113.

Major producing countries as well as Japan and the Soviet Union will meet again in Brussels at the end of June to tackle the remaining issues, following a meeting in May of the European environment ministers. The 31-nation working group will meet in Montreal just before the scheduled signing of the protocol.

Scientific evidence which may come to light before then, however, could change the calendar for the enactment of controls. The US National Ozone Expedition to Antarctica is scheduled for August. In addition, there could be scientific agreement on data submitted earlier this year to the House of Representatives which suggests much greater ozone depletion levels than originally predicted.

Kathy Johnstone

Rhyl not to blame



This picture from the OTA report on US marine waters prepared for Congress appears as an example of coastal waste discharge. But the photograph, supplied both to OTA and *Nature* by Greenpeace, was taken in Rhyl in North Wales, where officials say it is never used for sewage discharge. See "Coastal waters in jeopardy" on page 9.

Who decides US AIDS policy?

Washington

DISAGREEMENT within the US administration over how to control the spread of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) have surfaced in a controversial speech by Education Secretary William Bennett, calling for the introduction of compulsory AIDS tests. Speaking at Georgetown University, Washington, last week, Bennett argued that there was a "good case" for making AIDS testing a "requirement" for hospital patients, potential immigrants, prison inmates and applicants for marriage licences. Even the principle of medical confidentiality may have to be reconsidered in light of the AIDS epidemic. Open debate was now needed, he said, to weigh the claims of "individual privacy and the well-being of other individuals, and the health of the public". He pointed to a growing line of cases indicating that doctors have a "duty to notify third parties of the risk of infection from a patient and that physicians may be held liable for breach of this duty".

Bennett's views, reminiscent of guidelines recently introduced in Japan (see page 8 in this issue), have not found favour with the Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, and Public Health Service officials, who continue to believe that voluntary testing, offered in strict confidence, is the best way to find carriers of the AIDS virus. At a hearing of a House of Representatives subcommittee on health and the environment last week, Koop stressed that compulsory testing would lead to discrimination against AIDS-virus carriers and help drive the disease "underground".

Privately, officials of the Public Health Service are annoyed at Education Secretary Bennett's attempts to influence public health policy. Bennett had earlier criticized the content of planned AIDS education programmes and labelled emphasis on the use of condoms as "condom-mania" and "an evasion". A conservative, his support for "sexual abstinence among the young and sexual fidelity as the norm" as the best way to limit AIDS is echoed by President Ronald Reagan. But Bennett admits that his views are not shared by all members of the administration.

Given the disagreements, policy on compulsory testing and confidentiality now seems likely to be set by President Reagan. In response to criticism that the White House has failed to react quickly to the spread of AIDS — US spending on AIDS education is low compared to most European countries — and to increasingly pessimistic estimates of the scale of the epidemic. Reagan is believed to be preparing to set up a special commission on AIDS.

Alun Anderson