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EPA Set to Ban Powerful GHGs From Auto Air Conditioning

Grants NGO Petition to Revoke Approval of Super Greenhouse Gas HFC-134a

Washington, DC, March 23, 2011 – The U.S. EPA has agreed to grant a petition filed by a trio of NGOs to withdraw the agency’s approval to use the super greenhouse gas HFC-134a for air conditioning installed in new automobiles. (See below for link to original petition.) This will be followed by a formal “notice and comment” rulemaking to set the phase-out schedule.

The NGO petition was filed as part of a worldwide campaign to eliminate HFCs, one of the six greenhouse gases included under the Kyoto Protocol. HFCs are the fastest growing climate gas in the U.S. and many other countries. NRDC took the lead on the original petition, and was joined by the Institute for Governance & Sustainable Development (the Institute), and the Environmental Investigation Agency.

HFC-134a has a global warming potential (GWP) 1,400 times greater than CO₂. EPA approved the use of HFCs for mobile air conditioning under the Significant New Alternatives Policy (SNAP) Program at a time when safer alternatives were not available, and when fast action was needed to replace an even more climate damaging chemical, CFC-12.

“Now that we have climate-safe alternatives, EPA is acting prudently and consistent with its legal authority to get these dangerous HFCs off the market,” said Durwood Zaelke, President of the Institute.

Alternatives to HFC-134a for mobile air conditioning include HFO-1234yf (GWP of 4), which [was approved by the U.S. EPA](#) on 24 February 2011 for new passenger cars and light duty trucks. [General Motors announced last year](#) that they would use HFOs in some new models starting in 2011. Other approved alternatives include HFC-152a (GWP of ~140), as well as natural refrigerants such as hydrocarbons (GWP of 5) and CO₂ (GWP of 1).

Revoking approval for HFC-134a for mobile air conditioning will spur further development of alternatives in other sectors that currently depend on HFCs and that may be subject to future delisting under SNAP. This was the case in Europe, when six low-GWP substitutes were announced by chemical companies just weeks after the European directive set the schedule for phasing out HFC refrigerants from mobile air conditioning in the 27 European Union countries. There are other emerging technologies with low GWP and high energy efficiency that can rapidly replace HFC and HCFC greenhouse gases in insulating foam products.

“Reducing all HFCs can produce a Planet-saving 100 billion tonnes or more of CO₂-equivalent in climate mitigation,” added Zaelke. “We can get 30% of this by outlawing HFCs in mobile air conditioning, as the European Union is already doing, starting with new models in 2011. And we can do it fast—easily in 7 years for new cars as required in Europe, or in as little as three years if automakers get serious about improving their cars.”

EPA’s decision “will encourage a rapid market transformation using the best available technology, selected by industry, just in time to allow American automakers to sell their cars everywhere in the world,” said Stephen O. Andersen, who organized the Mobile Air Conditioning Climate Protection Partnership (MACCPP) during his time at EPA. He added, “Those outside the auto industry may think this is just more regulation, but it is actually government at its best helping industry move in concert on new technology the world needs to prosper.”

Since 2006, Zaelke’s NGO, along with EIA and NRDC, has been leading a broader effort to strengthen climate protection under the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer. The focus has been on using the Montreal Protocol to phase down HFCs, along with phase-outs in specific sectors, including mobile air conditioning.

“EPA’s decision to grant our petition to outlaw HFC-134a in mobile air conditioning is another significant step forward in the global effort to rid the world of all damaging HFCs and proof that EPA is re-emerging as a positive force for environmentally superior technology and the jobs created by technology progress,” said Zaelke. He added that “smart companies were already moving out of these super greenhouse gases”, citing the 400 companies that announced in Cancun last year during the climate negotiations that they would start phasing out HFCs beginning in 2015.

Last year, more than 90 countries supported action under the Montreal Protocol to reduce HFCs with high GWPs. The HFC effort was promoted by a coalition of vulnerable island countries led by the Federated States of Micronesia. The coalition proposed an amendment to the ozone treaty to phase down the upstream production and use of HFCs. Downstream emissions of HFCs would remain under the Kyoto Protocol. The North American countries of the United States, Mexico, and Canada also proposed a similar amendment last year.

The island coalition is preparing a similar proposal to re-submit later this spring. The North American countries are expected to re-submit their proposal. Once agreed, the amendment would ensure climate mitigation of up to 100 billion tonnes of CO₂-equivalent by 2050, many times more than the Kyoto Protocol climate treaty.

Last month, the U.S. and India announced that they were forming an HFC Task Force to analyze strategies for eliminating the high-GWP HFCs, following a joint workshop and consultations with stakeholders in New Delhi. The new task force is expected to submit a report by August 1st of this year, in advance of the Montreal Protocol’s mid-year, Open-Ended Working Group meeting August 1-5 in Bangkok.

India's Minister of Environment, Jairam Ramesh, stated during the workshop that the ozone treaty was "the world's most successful international environmental agreement" and that India has always complied with its phase-out obligations, often ahead of schedule. The Montreal Protocol is also the world's best climate treaty, achieving direct climate mitigation of more than 200 billion tonnes of CO₂-equivalent (see [graph](#)).

Although India – with concerns about alternatives and available financing – did not voice support for the 2010 proposals to phase out high-GWP HFCs, Minister Ramesh stated at the joint HFC workshop last month that, "With international financing and technology support, there is no reason why India should not lead in the phase-down of HFCs.

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Original petition: http://docs.nrdc.org/air/files/air_10050701a.pdf

For more information on HFCs and the Montreal Protocol, see:

Mario Molina, Durwood Zaelke, K. Madhava Sarma, Stephen O. Andersen, Veerabhadran Ramanathan, and Donald Kaniaru, *Reducing abrupt climate change risk using the Montreal Protocol and other regulatory actions to complement cuts in CO₂ emissions*, **PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES** (2009), found here:

<http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2009/10/09/0902568106.full.pdf+html>