The Netherlands
Report on EMF Activities
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1. New standards, legislations and ordinances

In January 2004, the State Secretary of Public Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment has sent a political document entitled “Sensible dealing with risks” to Parliament.

In the Netherlands, environmental policy is risk-based. However, the decision making process has not always been clear or consistent. There are several dossiers that have proven to be of difficult nature, for instance because the underlying science does not unambiguously indicates risks, or because of public perceptions, or because any mitigating measures will be far-reaching and costly. Decisions on these dossiers, e.g. power lines, base stations, indoor radon, have been continuously postponed or regulation has thusfar been left to the industry.

The “Sensible dealing with risks” document is based on a structured analysis of all relevant information, using an approach developed by the National Institute of Public Health and the Environment. For each dossier an inventory is made of the available scientific data, the possible adverse health effects, the benefits of the technology and the costs of measures to reduce exposure. Having all this information available in a structured document will facilitate a transparent political decision process. Explicit responsibilities for the authorities, the industry and the public can be identified. A weighting of hazards and risks of an activity against the costs and benefits will be facilitated and it will allow more insight into cumulation of risks. The role of citizens in the decision making process can be improved (e.g. by participation).

In “Sensible dealing with risks” the government states with respect to mobile telephone base stations that additional research is needed further to the TNO study that found effects of UMTS on well-being, but that the TNO results are presently no reason to limit the rollout of mobile telephony networks. Regarding the February 2003 proposals of Health Council for studies on longterm health effects of RF EMF exposure, the document states that incorporation in European research plans will be promoted. It is also mentioned that the industry needs to take its responsibility regarding studies into possible health effects and that both the industry and the government will evaluate and improve communication with the public.

Regarding the power line issue, the document states that it is proposed to increase for new situations the minimum distance between power lines and dwellings such that exposure of children will be to magnetic fields not exceeding 0.4 µT. No changes in existing situations are proposed. These will invariably incur very high costs. An active and transparent communication between government, industry and the public is envisaged, which will allow all stakeholders to take their own informed decisions.
Discussion of the “Sensible dealing with risks” document in Parliament was scheduled for early June 2004, but has been postponed until after the summer holiday break.

2. Research activities

In September 2003 the results of “the TNO study” were published (http://www.ez.nl/content.jsp?objectid=28386). In this study, volunteers were exposed under double-blind conditions to GSM-900, GSM-1800 or UMTS-like fields. A small decrease in well-being was observed for exposure to UMTS-like fields, but not for exposure to either GSM-frequency. Effects on cognitive functions were found, but without a clear structure. On the basis of critical remarks made by the scientific community, additional analyses were performed, which led to disappearance of most of the significant effects found for cognitive functions, but those for well-being remained.

Media coverage of the study has been extensive and in a number of countries the media reports have led to considerable public anxiety, resulting in sometimes an almost complete standstill of the rollout of UMTS networks.

The Netherlands Government has requested the Health Council to give its opinion on the scientific quality of the TNO study and to recommend what further studies should be performed. The Health Council report is expected to be published by the end of June 2004 and can then be found at http://www.gr.nl.

3. Public concern and ways to deal with them

A translation in Dutch of the WHO handbook on EMF risk communication is being prepared.

4. Other topics of related interest