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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

14 February 1989

Dear Deborah

"SAVING THE OZONE LAYER" CONFERENCE: 5/7 MARCH

Thank you for your letter of 6 February. You will have seen Charles Powell's letter of 13 February covering a revised synopsis of the speech. We discussed a number of the other outstanding points. This is to confirm the Prime Minister's request that Professor James Lovelock should be invited to the conference. She is aware of the serious constraints on space but feels that in view of his reputation and long standing connection with the ozone problem it would be right for him to be present.

You were kindly looking into whether retailers will be present during the industry exhibition surrounding the conference displaying ozone friendly and other environment friendly products. The Prime Minister mentioned in particular Asda, Tesco, Body Shop, and possibly Marks and Spencer. It would be useful for her to have one or two examples of such ozone friendly products to refer to in her speech.

You also kindly agreed to let me have a note on the availability of substitutes for harmful CFCs in fire extinguishers, refrigerants and foam production and what, if anything, UK industry/Government is doing to promote these.

As far as the logistical points in your letter to me are concerned, the Prime Minister had no objection to your Secretary of State doubling our contribution to UNEP's Voluntary Fund, subject to securing satisfactory arrangements with the Chief Secretary. She commented however that this seems a fairly small measure to refer to in her own speech and wondered whether it would be better to set this in the context of a similar increase in Voluntary Fund contributions to UNEP by all other countries (or at least developed countries).

The arrangements you propose for the programme seem generally acceptable but perhaps we could have a further word about the timing of her departure on the first morning. My guess is that she will want to stay for the video and possibly even for one or two of the scientific presentations. Do we yet have the precise timings for these? I am sure she would like to have a brief look over the industry exhibition on the

third floor on her way out. You will want to consider how that fits with President Moi's movements that morning. I am sure she will be pleased for him to accompany her around the industry exhibition if the timings worked.

A copy of this letter goes to Stephen Wall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Myles Wickstead (Overseas Development Administration), Jeremy Godfrey (Department of Trade and Industry) and Trevor Woolley (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever

Dominic

Dominic Morris

Miss Deborah Lamb
Department of the Environment.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS
Tel: 01-210 5319

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For the attention of: ..DOMINIC..MORRIS.....
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From: ..FLORA GOLDHILL.....
Room 407.....
Kenneth Clarke's Office.....

Total No of pages: ...5.....

Any queries: 210 5319

BACKGROUND NOTE

Dioxins and Furans

1. The group of chemicals known as "dioxins" (polychlorinated dibenzo-dioxins, PCDDs, 75 compounds in total) and the closely related "furans" (polychlorinated dibenzofurans, PCDFs, 135 compounds in total) are toxic compounds which can enter the environment as a result of combustion of any organic material in the presence of chlorine; the incomplete combustion of PCBs (Polychlorinated biphenyls - these may have had valuable industrial uses in the past but are now no longer produced; disposal of products containing PCBs poses difficulties) and from certain industrial processes. "Dioxins" first came to public attention because of the presence of some of these compounds as contaminants in defoliants such as "Agent Orange" which was used in the Vietnam war, and then more recently in the Seveso explosion in Italy in 1976, when the most toxic of these compounds, TCDD, was released as a result of a chemical reaction going out of control at a factory.

2. Very small quantities of "dioxins" and "furans" can be detected in environmental samples generally and the compounds are very wide spread in the environment with the higher chlorinated, less toxic compounds being most common. Commercial and other incinerators are potential sources if operated inefficiently. The amount of "dioxins" and "furans" present in samples is generally expressed in terms of "TCDD equivalents", as TCDD is the only "dioxin" to have been tested toxicologically.

3. The Programme highlighted the production of "dioxins" as by-products in the bleaching of wood pulp with chlorine-containing chemicals, with the result that low levels can be present in paper. This may have potential significance for the diet, particularly because of the use of paper and board in food packaging materials. Reference was made to work carried out in North America and Scandinavia.

Dioxins in Food

4. A survey carried out in 1987 by the US Environmental Protection Agency showed that "dioxin" levels in food packaging materials were less than 14 parts per trillion TCDD equivalents, and preliminary results of laboratory experiments have indicated that there is only a very low degree of migration of "dioxins" into food. However recent Canadian studies have indicated that some low levels of contamination of milk in cartons may take place when the carton is opened and studies on coffee filter paper suggest that there may be some carry-over into the coffee. However the levels are in both cases very low and potential dietary intakes are at the picogram level (1 picogram = 1 million millionth of a gram) expressed as "TCDD equivalents".

Dioxins in other paper products

5. The American and Swedish research has shown low levels of "dioxins" in disposable nappies, tampons, sanitary towels and paper tissues. Dioxin is fat soluble, so in theory could be absorbed. However, the degree of absorption of "dioxins" from these products is unknown but is likely to be low.

Health Aspects

6. The Department's expert advisory Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) is currently considering in detail the potential human health hazards of dioxins, and the Department would wish to have this advice to hand before making a definitive statement on this matter. However, preliminary data indicates that the very low levels of dioxins reported in paper products are most unlikely to represent a hazard to human health.

The committee expects to report to the Chief Medical Officer within the next month.

Other concerns

7. The allegations of ill health in children and farm livestock in 1985 at Bonybridge, Scotland and Torfaen, South Wales related to the operation of waste disposal incineration plants by Rechem Ltd. Enquiries set up by the Government concluded that there was no evidence of a link between the discharges and the reported cases of ill health but recommended further investigation of certain conditions occurring in young children.

CONCLUSIONS AND LINE TO TAKE

8. The Department is aware of the reports from North America and elsewhere indicating that dioxins are present in certain paper products. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has instigated a programme of work on dioxins in food, and the results of this programme should make it possible to determine the significance of any dioxin migration into food from packaging materials. DTI is seeking more information from the suppliers about levels in certain consumer products. However, on the data available to-date, we do not consider that there is a need to take any immediate action on health grounds as regards cartons, coffee filters, nappies or any other paper products.

NOTE: 1. If the question of need is raised, this should be referred to MAFF for food packaging materials and DTI for nappies, etc. Environmental effects are a matter for the Department of the Environment.

2. DOE, in conjunction with other departments, will shortly be producing a Pollution Paper on "dioxins" and "furans" which will include information on sources, levels found in the environment, health effects and exposures.

TOXICOLOGY - BACKGROUND NOTE

Government advice on toxicological matters is initially provided by the Chief Medical Officer's staff in MED-H(TEH) (Toxicology and Environmental Health). Independent expert advice is provided by the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT). Members of the COT are drawn from academia, clinical medicine, medical research or industry, or they are independent consultants. Membership is as follows:-

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Professor Paul Turner (Clinical Pharmacologist)	St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College

MEMBERS

Professor F Beck (Anatomist (Teratologist)	University of Leicester
Professor C L Berry (Pathologist)	The London Hospital Medical College
Professor Dame Barbara Clayton (Chemical Pathologist)	Southampton General Hospital
Professor A D Dayan (Toxicologist)	Director of DHSS Toxicology Laboratory
Dr J M Dewdney (Immunologist)	Beecham Pharmaceuticals
Professor A Ferguson (Gastroenterologist)	Western General Hospital, Edinburgh
Professor W P T James (Nutritionist)	The Rowett Research Institute
Dr A G Renwick (Clinical Pharmacologist)	University of Southampton
Dr F J C Roe (Independent Toxicologist)	Independent Consultant
Dr M Sharratt (Industrial Toxicologist)	British Petroleum Company plc
Mr F Sullivan (Pharmacologist & Reproductive Toxicologist)	Guy's Hospital
Dr G N Volans	Director of Poisons Unit
Mr D Walker (Veterinary Histopathologist)	Independent Consultant

The COT's terms of reference are attached.

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