

# Cuts in Ozone-Depleting Pesticide OK'd

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WASHINGTON -- A group of 189 developed nations, including the United States, have agreed to cut use of a pesticide that depletes the ozone layer.

The group originally had agreed to phase out use of the pesticide, methyl bromide, by January. The pesticide has been used for decades to sterilize soil and help grow crops such as tomatoes and strawberries, but it also damages the Earth's protective ozone layer.

At a meeting in Montreal this week, 13 developed nations won exemptions to the 1987 U.N. Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layers, allowing them to continue using the pesticide in 2006.

They were permitted to use more than 14,300 tons of it, or nearly 20 percent less than the 17,700 tons approved for use this year. More than half of next year's amount will be used in the United States; the next biggest exemptions, in order of use, went to Italy, Spain, Israel, France, Japan, Australia, Britain, Canada, Poland, New Zealand, Switzerland and Belgium.

"The importance of today's decision is that it maintains the downward trend in methyl bromide use by developed countries," Klaus Toepfer, executive director of the U.N. Environment Program based in Nairobi, Kenya, said in a statement Friday.

Toepfer said the latest cuts "should send a positive signal to farmers and other users of methyl bromide that alternatives are increasingly available and should be adopted as quickly as possible."

On the other hand, Toepfer said, they "should also encourage developing countries to stay on track with their own efforts to phase-out this harmful substance."

Environmentalists say the United States has been asking for far more than it needs while not taking into account the stockpile that it has amassed of methyl bromide.

"The exemptions are coming down only very slowly, and the United States was forced to agree it really does have to reveal and take into account its huge stockpile," said David Doniger, policy director for Natural Resources Defense Council's Climate Center.