

Address by Minister Tina Birbili

15/01/2011

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all to what we think is an important event and to thank you for your valuable contribution by participating in this workshop. A workshop aiming to bring together some of the leading experts in order to discuss the serious and at the same time somewhat controversial issue of Hexavalent Chromium in drinking water.

Allow me to say a few words about the background of this event.

As early as February last year, just a few months after I was entrusted with the post of Minister in the newly formed Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change, I was alarmed both as a Minister and a citizen by the extent and seriousness of the pollution in the Asopos region.

The region, named after the river Asopos flowing through the catchment area, is a heavily industrialized area not far away from Athens. The long term effect of a combination of inadequate legislation and ineffective surveillance was an unacceptable pollution by a variety of toxic pollutants; hexavalent chromium being one of the prevailing metals. A pollution extending from surface waters to the groundwater, the problem being more pronounced in the latter.

The ground water in the area is used for agricultural, industrial but also for drinking purposes, at least by some of the communities in the region. Admittedly, in many cases the recorded concentrations did not and do not violate the legal limit of 50 µg/l in terms of total chromium. However, the fact that very often hexavalent chromium is by far the largest part of the total chromium gives justified reasons for concern.

On the basis of the evidence we decided to adopt the precaution principle and as a consequence our immediate action focused on providing safe water from alternative sources, namely from the Mornos reservoir, which serves the greater Athens Area.

This was only one element of an integrated approach, aiming to tackle the overall pollution problem. A new legislation was introduced, regulating more than 60 parameters, with strict environmental quality standards for the Asopos river and corresponding emission standards for the industries. For

the case of hexavalent chromium an environmental quality standards of 3 µg/l was set and a corresponding emission standard of 30 µg/l.

Presently we are working in close collaboration with the industries in the region on a road map for full compliance. Parallel to this, we are in the process of investigating possible cost effective measures of decontamination.

The case of Asopos is not the only one in Greece. Although not as intense, similar problems with hexavalent chromium can be found in other groundwaters. It is therefore not surprising that concern has been expressed about the adequacy of the existing, not only in Greece but internationally, regulatory status.

As you all know despite repeated revisions the standard of 50 µg/l for total chromium still holds. And not without strong documentation based on technological, financial, practical but also health consideration, such as the evidence of reduction of chromium in the digestive system. One can not help thinking however that maybe the strongest argument in favor of the total chromium "theory" is based on the underlying assumption that the presence of hexavalent chromium in substantial concentrations is unlikely.

But what if and when this is not the case ? There is a school of thought that believes that this violates the basic assumption and that the whole concept needs revision. Probably California is the birthplace of this approach and it is fortunate that we have with us today leading experts from this part of the world. I am sure that their contribution together with the contributions of all of you will help towards an approach on the subject from a variety of interesting and learned points of view .

Concluding my introductory note I would like to note that although the question posed by any regulatory authority is simple and straight forward- to regulate or not to regulate- the answer has proved not to be so obvious. It would be too optimistic to expect that a straight-forward yes or no can be achieved today. But I am sure that a gathering like this will no doubt reach at very useful conclusions. Conclusions that will not only help the two ministries in deciding the next steps but will also make a substantial contribution for a better understanding of the problem at an international level

With this closing remark I wish you a successful meeting and I hope for those of you who have come from abroad a pleasant stay.