

European ecolabel scheme threatened by failure to take account of scientific assessment

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A panel of 10 European industry associations has warned that the European ecolabelling scheme's mission¹ of providing long-term environmental protection is being jeopardised. Alarmed by the reducing role given to science in the ecolabelling decision-making process, industry is questioning the means used by the National Competent Ecolabelling Bodies to achieve this mission. Industry is convinced that environmental protection is a serious and long-term issue, which must be addressed in the first place according to scientific principles, even if political and economic considerations, as well as consumer concerns, can also be taken into consideration.

The EU Member States adopted, together with the European Parliament, some of the most stringent and most comprehensive chemicals policy instruments existing in the world. In the EU, the official risk assessment procedure as laid down in the ESR² is the vehicle for experts from the Member States to reach and publish official conclusions on the environmental safety and human health impacts of materials according to adequate scientific data. With the entry into force of REACH³, again adopted by the Member States and the European Parliament, the risk assessment procedure will be extended to a much wider number of materials during the next decade. Industry has always supported this risk-based approach and is totally committed to provide consumer products meeting the highest levels of safety.

During the last meeting of the European Ecolabelling Board, on April 23, 2008, a majority of the representatives of the Member States rejected the European Commission's proposed criteria, which referred to the official risk assessment procedure and to the REACH regulation⁴. That negation, by the National Competent Ecolabelling Bodies, of the existing regulations and of the scientific conclusions issued by a panel of experts commissioned by the Member States themselves, is alarming for the industry, which needs a clear and uniform framework in which to operate.

When positive official risk assessment conclusions are disregarded by the European ecolabel criteria, materials demonstrated to be reliable and safe can unjustifiably be deselected. This may oblige companies wishing to manufacture ecolabelled goods to use other materials, not evaluated through the official risk assessment procedure. It is industry's responsibility to warn about the potential consequences of unilateral blacklisting recommendations promoted by the environmental and consumers NGOs, which could prove extremely harmful for the environment and for human health, but also for the image of the European ecolabel and of the participating companies.

The precautionary principle is regularly cited as a core element of European ecolabel schemes. In industry's view, the correct interpretation of the precautionary principle would be:

- to promote the use of officially risk-assessed materials, demonstrated to be safe according to regulated information,
- otherwise to promote the use of alternative materials which do not raise concerns about their long-term impact on health and the environment, according to data whose quality is comparable to those required by the legal framework.

While Industry understands the remit of ecolabel schemes is to "go beyond legislation", this should be done on the basis of science, fully consistent with the Commission's regulatory framework and the best practice embodied in the REACH legislation.

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¹ As laid down in article 1 of Regulation (EC) No 1980/2000 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 July 2000 on a revised Community eco-label award scheme.

² « Existing Substances Regulation » - Council Regulation (EEC) No 793/93 of 23 March 1993 on the evaluation and control of the risks of existing substances.

³ Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 concerning the Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH).

⁴ Meeting of the European Ecolabelling Board of 23 April 2008, about the revision of the European ecolabel criteria for Bed Mattresses and Textile Products, and about the development of European ecolabel criteria for Wooden Furniture.



UEAPME is the employer's organisation representing the interests of European crafts, trades and SMEs at EU level. UEAPME is a recognised European Social Partner. It is a non-profit seeking and non-partisan organisation. As the European SME umbrella organisation, UEAPME incorporates 86 member organisations consisting of national cross-sectorial SME federations, European branch federations and other associate members, which support the SME family. UEAPME represents more than 12 million enterprises, which employ around 55 million people across Europe.

Andrea Benassi ■ Secretary General

PlasticsEurope

Association of Plastics Manufacturers

PlasticsEurope represents the plastics manufacturers in Europe. The association has more than 60 member companies, producing over 90% of polymers across the EU's 27 member states plus Croatia, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey. The plastics chain in Europe - including converters and machinery manufacturers - employs over 1.6 million people. The combined turnover of our industry is in excess of 160 billion euro per annum. PlasticsEurope operates from six decentralised offices: one in Brussels and five regional centres located in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK. The European plastics industry makes a significant contribution to the welfare in Europe by enabling innovation, creating quality of life to citizens and facilitating resource efficiency and climate protection. More than 1.6 million people are working in about 50.000 companies (mainly small and medium sized companies in the converting sector) to create a turnover in excess of 280 billion € per year.

Wilfried Haensel ■ Executive Director



Plastic Additives Cluster

Cefic (The European Chemical Industry Council) is the Brussels-based organization representing the European chemical industry. Cefic represents, directly or indirectly, about 29,000 large, medium and small chemical companies which employ about 1.3 million people and account for nearly a third of world chemical production.

Brigitte Dero ■ Director Plastic Additives



EFRA (The European Flame Retardants Association) brings together all the major companies which manufacture or market flame retardants in Europe. EFRA covers all types of flame retardants: chemicals based on bromine, phosphorus, nitrogen, inorganic compounds and intumescent systems. EFRA is a sector group of Cefic, the European Chemical Industry Council.

Rudi Borms ■ Chairman



ECVM (The European Council of Vinyl Manufacturers) represents the European PVC resin producing companies and is a division of PlasticsEurope. Its membership includes 14 leading European PVC resin producers which together account for 99% of EU 27 production. ECVM is also a leading partner of Vinyl 2010 - the organisation implementing the Voluntary Commitment of the PVC Industry - together with ESPA - representing the stabiliser producers, ECPI - representing the plasticiser producers and EuPC - representing the PVC converters.

Jean-Pierre De Grève ■ Executive Director



EuPC is the leading EU-level Trade Association, based in Brussels, representing European Plastics Converters. Its powerful European Plastics Network exists to support the beneficial use of plastics worldwide, especially providing plastics converting companies with a voice in European legislation. EuPC now totals about 51 European Plastics Converting national and European industry associations, it represents close to 50,000 companies, producing over 45 millions tonnes of plastic products every year.

Alexandre Dangis ■ Managing Director



EBFRIP (The European Brominated Flame Retardant Industry Panel) brings together the major manufacturers of brominated flame retardants in the European market, joined by a number of major polymer producers as associate members. EBFRIP acts as the main spokesperson for the bromine flame retardants industry in Europe on key issues such as fire safety, eco-labels, electronic waste and risk assessments. EBFRIP is a sector group of Cefic, the European Chemical Industry Council.

Veronique Steukers ■ Chairwoman



ECPI (The European Council for Plasticisers and Intermediates) is a Brussels-based trade association representing the common interests of European manufacturers of plasticisers, alcohols and acids. ECPI is a sector group of Cefic, the European Chemical Industry Council, which represents the interests of the European chemical industry.

Luca Bielli ■ Chairman



Euratex, the European Apparel and Textile Organisation, represents the interests of Europe's textile and clothing industry. It expresses the views of that industry to the European Commission and to the European Parliament on behalf of 114,000 companies in the European Union which employed close to 2.2 million workers in 2001.

William H. Lakin ■ Director General



EUROPUR represents the flexible polyurethane foam block manufacturers at European level. The association was set up in 1966 and is registered under Belgian law as an AISBL 'Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif' (International Non-Profit Association).

Hubert Creyf ■ Secretary General