

# EU CHEMICALS STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY

A key goal of the European Commission's Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability is to implement measures to better protect people and the environment from harmful chemicals. The print industry will need to be well represented in this new drive for sustainability within the chemical industry, writes Elaine Campling



Elaine Campling is Chair of ESMA's Health, Safety & Environmental Protection Committee

**The European Commission adopted the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability in October 2020, as part of the European Union (EU) 'zero pollution ambition', which is a key commitment of the European Green Deal. The overarching aim of the European Green Deal is to achieve a climate neutral Europe in 2050.**

Some interesting facts about chemicals, the chemical industry and chemical legislation are set out in a Communication from the Commission [to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions], on the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability:

- Global sales of chemicals were 3347 billion euros in 2018, with Europe the second biggest producer (accounting for 16.9% of sales);
- The European share of the global sales of chemicals has halved over the last 20 years (to 2018) and is further predicted to decline by 2030 to move Europe into third position;
- Chemical manufacturing is the fourth largest industry in the EU comprising 30,000 companies, 95% of which are small to medium-sized enterprises that directly employ around 1.2 million people (3.6 million indirectly).

## HUMAN IMPACT

The Communication also describes a comprehensive regulatory framework within the EU, comprising approximately 40 legislative instruments including the regulation on the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) and the regulation governing the Classification, Labelling and Packaging of hazardous substances (CLP). Other key pieces of legislation are in place for the safety of toys, cosmetics, biocides, plant protection products, food, as well as environmental protection legislation.

*"Human biomonitoring studies conducted in the EU point to a growing number of different hazardous chemicals in human blood and body tissue"*

However, despite an extensive regulatory landscape, 'human biomonitoring studies conducted in the EU point to a growing number of different hazardous chemicals in human blood and body tissue, including certain pesticides, biocides, pharmaceuticals, heavy metals, plasticisers and flame retardants.'

## KEY ACTIONS

The Commission states that a key goal of the strategy is to implement measures to better protect people and the environment from harmful chemicals.

The key actions identified are as follows:

- Ban the most harmful chemicals in consumer products – allowing those chemicals only where their use is essential.
- Pay attention to the cocktail effect of chemicals when assessing chemical risks.
- Phase out per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in the EU, unless their use is essential.
- Boost investment and innovative capacity for the production and use of chemicals that are safe and sustainable by design throughout their lifecycle.
- Promote the EU's supply and sustainability of critical chemicals.

- Establish a simpler 'one substance, one assessment' process for assessing the risks and hazards of chemicals.
- Play a leading role globally by championing and promoting high chemical safety standards and not exporting chemicals banned in the EU.

## SUBSTANCE EVALUATION

The Commission wishes to move from the evaluation of a substance on a case-to-case basis, to a more holistic approach where the substance is evaluated across all spheres of use e.g. as an ingredient of both a printing ink

and a cosmetic. Groups of chemical families will also be evaluated where appropriate, rather than as isolated substances; this approach has been used in the current regulatory initiative on PFAS.

The Commission is working to define criteria for 'essential use', whereby 'the most harmful chemicals' will only be permitted if their use is considered necessary for health, or safety, or is critical for the functioning of society. A system of 'authorisation of use' is currently a facet of the REACH regulation. It seems that it will become necessary to demonstrate that there are no safer alternatives at design level. The criteria

*"The planned digitisation of some label elements could remove some print from labels"*

developed by the Commission will guide the application of essential uses in all relevant EU legislation for both generic and specific risk assessments.

According to the Commission, consumer products such as food contact materials, toys, childcare articles, cosmetics, detergents, furniture and textiles will be specifically targeted to ensure they do not contain chemicals that cause cancers, gene mutations, affect the reproductive or the endocrine system, or are persistent and bioaccumulative.

**NEW CHALLENGES**

Policy aims have already led to the published roadmaps for revisions to the REACH and CLP Regulations recently reported in *Specialist Printing Worldwide* (Issue 3, 2021). An open consultation on the proposed revision to the CLP Regulation is the latest policy initiative.

Many of the consumer products mentioned are directly printed e.g. textiles, or contained in packaging that is printed, without which critical elements would not currently be available, such as user instructions on detergents.

The planned digitisation of some label elements could remove some print from labels and in a wider context decorated products may not be considered essential use. The print industry will need to be well represented in this new drive for

sustainability within the chemical industry.

The Commission has put forward the idea that regulatory drivers for the use of 'safer' and more sustainable chemicals will lead to innovation. The print industry has so often been in the forefront of innovation and will not shy away from the new challenges of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability.

**FURTHER READING:**

Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability - ECHA (europa.eu)

Strategy.pdf (europa.eu)

Revision of EU legislation on hazard classification, labelling and packaging of chemicals (europa.eu)

Chemicals – simplification and digitalisation of labelling requirements (europa.eu)

Chemicals strategy: Commission publishes

roadmaps on the revision of REACH and CLP (europa.eu)

A European Green Deal | European Commission (europa.eu) ■

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