

Brussels, 1st June 2007

New European Chemicals Agency starts operations as REACH enters into force

The new European chemicals legislation, REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and restrictions of Chemicals) enters into force today, and with it the new European Chemicals Agency starts operations in Helsinki. The REACH regulation will significantly improve protection of human health and the environment while encouraging innovation and keeping the EU's chemical industry competitive. The Agency, which is responsible for managing the implementation of the new requirements, will launch a website providing key information such as guidance documents, helpdesks and other tools relating to REACH. Starting on 1 June 2007, the Agency will have to work hard to become fully operational on 1 June 2008, when companies will begin on-line submission of pre-registrations and registration dossiers. The Agency's Interim Executive Director is Mr. Geert Dancet, who has been seconded by the Commission to head the team which will get the Agency started.

Commission Vice President Günter Verheugen, responsible for enterprise and industry, said: "The Chemicals Agency will play a key role in the effective implementation of REACH, helping to deliver improved health, and environmental conditions while at the same time maintaining competitiveness and encouraging innovation. The valuable support from Finland in the establishment of the Agency in Helsinki is much appreciated".

Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas commented: "With the entry into force of REACH, the EU is providing itself with the most progressive chemicals legislation in the world. Properly setting up the European Chemicals Agency is now the next big step to make sure that REACH will work in practice. Much work remains to be done to protect our health and the environment from the dangers chemicals can pose."

New requirements for chemicals

Adopted last December after more than three years of discussion, REACH enters into force today. It is the most ambitious chemicals legislation anywhere in the world combining the ambition for the highest health and environmental protection with enhancing the competitiveness of European industry.

The day-to-day management of the REACH legislation will be within the responsibility of the new European Chemicals Agency (ECHA).

REACH requires the registration over a period of 11 years of some 30,000 chemical substances in use today, which will be coordinated by the new Agency. This process will allow information gaps on their hazards to be filled and appropriate risk management measures to be identified to ensure their safe use. The onus will be on industry to generate the data required and to identify the measures needed to manage the risks.

The Agency will also run the evaluation of those chemical substances that are suspected of posing a risk to health or the environment and the authorisation system for the use of substances of very high concern, foreseen by REACH.

The REACH authorisation system will strongly encourage companies to switch to safer alternatives. All applications for an authorisation will need to include an analysis of alternatives and a substitution plan where a suitable alternative exists. REACH will also enable more rapid total or partial bans where unacceptable risks are detected.

In addition, measures are foreseen to ensure that animal testing is kept to the strict minimum and to encourage the use of alternative testing methods.

The Agency begins operations

One of the Agency's first tasks is to make sufficient information available to companies - especially Small- and Medium-Sized enterprises (SMEs) - on how to comply with the new requirements. For this purpose the Agency is launching a multilingual website at <http://echa.europa.eu>. The website serves as a single access point for general information on chemicals, guidance documents and other tools on how to comply with the REACH legislation. From 1 June 2008 it will also provide an interface for on-line registration of substances.

Companies will also have access to a helpdesk through the site. The Agency helpdesk is connected to a network of national REACH helpdesks, many of which are already operational and actively disseminating information on the new Regulation through workshops, brochures and websites.

For the first 18 months some 40 officials have been seconded from the European Commission to help with setting up the Agency. They will play a key role in training the new staff and building up the operational structure.

The first day of the Agency's operation was celebrated by a press event at its premises in Helsinki with the participation of the Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen and the European Commission Vice President Günter Verheugen.

Further information:

Information on REACH is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/reach/index_en.htm

or

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/chemicals/reach/reach_intro.htm

European Chemicals Agency (ECHA):

<http://echa.europa.eu>