REACH register to ensure traceability of nanomaterials

Medical Design Technology

Products containing nanomaterials are already being mass-produced in areas such as food, electronics and cosmetics, but the political debate on regulating nanotechnologies began only recently.

A lack of scientific knowledge and the absence of evidence of their health and safety hazards represent, however, a big challenge for any regulation attempts.

No government in the world has developed a specific nanotech regulation to date, but all stakeholders agree that more research on the health and environmental risks posed by nanoparticles is needed.

"*Nanomaterials are increasingly present in consumer products and everyday items we use, and yet we don't know a lot about them,*" said **Paul Magnette**, the Belgian minister in charge of consumer protection and environment.

Magnette was speaking yesterday (14 September) at the opening of a workshop on the traceability of the tiny substances, organised by the Belgian EU Presidency.

The Belgian minister said there was "*no need to be alarmed*" about the increased use of nanomaterials in consumer products that are sold in European markets without any assessment of the risks beforehand.

But he stressed that "*it is our duty to apply due minimum of care and caution*" and manage risks to health and the environment.
He also argued that "*the current development approach for nanomaterials without prior notification of their presence or labelling of their characteristics or potential toxicity is not acceptable*".

Magnette sought to strike a balance between calls for a moratorium on nanomaterials based on the precautionary principle and arguments from industry groups, which say their potential risks to human health are have not been proven.

Advocating the "*no data, no market*" principle, which would establish a de facto moratorium, would be too restrictive, Magnette said. But he also deplored the fact that only the merits of nanomaterials are currently being put forward by industry, as this "*biases consumer information*".

The only realistic way to make nanomaterials acceptable to the wider public is to reduce uncertainty about their effects, he said. "*Otherwise the market risks being disrupted by individual or collective citizens' initiatives [rejecting nanomaterials in products], as happened with GMOs,*" **Magnette** warned.

Regulatory review of nanomaterials by end 2011

After a first review in June 2008, the Commission will conduct its second regulatory review of nanomaterials by the end of next year (EurActiv 19/06/08; EurActiv 13/10/09).

Maila Puolamaa, chemicals policy officer at the European Commission's department for enterprise and industry, said that the review will focus on the inclusion of nanomaterials under the REACH regulation on chemicals.

Issues to be addressed include simplified registration for nanomaterials produced in quantities of less than one tonne per year and notification of all nanomaterials placed on the market on their own, in preparation or in articles, she said.

All aspects related to existing environmental legislation on water, waste and air - as well as worker safety - will also be addressed, Puolamaa added.
The results of the assessment will be included in the 2012 REACH review.

Mandatory consumer labeling?
Paul Magnette said the Belgian EU Presidency hopes that the review will make consumer information about the presence of nanomaterials in products mandatory and provide a "traceability chain" back to the source through a mandatory REACH register of nanomaterials.
The Belgian Presidency also expects the forthcoming European Commission Action Plan on Environment and Health from 2011 onwards to include the challenge of nanotechnology and nanomaterials as one of its priorities.

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