



EU citizens risk falling victim to Commission's indecision on REACH

November 14th 2006, Strasbourg - Negotiations on the future EU chemicals law REACH risk heading for failure, after the Finnish Presidency last week presented 'compromise solutions' which practically ignore the Parliament's central demands. Crucially, the Council text still holds that the chemicals industry should get a green light for the continuing use of very hazardous chemicals, including chemicals that cause cancer, birth defects and other serious illnesses, even when suitable safer alternatives are available. This flies in the face of the European Parliament's demand that suitable safer alternatives should be given preference in the future.

Negotiations between the Parliament, Council and Commission will continue on Monday 20th November. Under normal conditions, it would be the institutional role of the European Commission to draft compromises that help Parliament and Council come to an agreement. However, in the case of REACH, President Barroso seems to have decided to keep the Commission on the sidelines.

So far, the Commission is the only institution that has not yet debated substitution at the highest level. There is growing discontent with President Barroso's passive approach, and the resulting signs of inconsistency and partiality. Environment Commissioner Dimas repeatedly stated that a legal incentive for substitution would be a win-win solution for environment, health and innovative businesses. Industry Commissioner Verheugen also stated publicly his support for the substitution of hazardous chemicals whenever safer alternatives are available. However, behind the scenes, he is blocking progress.

The European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Friends of the Earth Europe, Greenpeace and WWF urge the Commission to take an active role in the negotiations to prevent a deadlock between Parliament and Council. *"The Commission urgently needs to start playing its role as a facilitator, otherwise the Council will continue its sleepwalk towards Conciliation"* said Sandra Jen of WWF.

"If the Council wants to reach a compromise with the European Parliament, it has started off on the wrong track. The Presidency offers just a few technical clarifications to what was agreed last year by governments. This can only be called a smokescreen. The Commission must not hide behind it or allow Commissioner Verheugen to block further progress", said Stefan Scheuer from the European Environmental Bureau.

The Finnish Presidency proposal would still force authorities to allow uses of toxic chemicals even when suitable safer alternatives are available. This was rejected in November last year by the Parliament's assembly, and again by the Parliament's lead committee in October this year.

“If the Finnish Presidency proposal is adopted, chemicals causing cancer, reproductive disorders as well as birth defects and hormonal disturbances would stay on the market even though there are safer alternatives available. This means no improvement of the current, flawed system of chemicals management”, said Fouad Hamdan from Friends of the Earth Europe.

“Following recent statements by Industry Commissioner Verheugen calling for strict substitution of dangerous chemicals, we would expect the Commission to move from lip-service to action. If the Commission is serious about promoting win-win situations for health, environment and business, it should support substitution in REACH and help Parliament and Council come to an agreement”, said Jorgo Riss from Greenpeace.

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