
ECHA DIALOGUES WITH OVER 300 STAKEHOLDERS IN HELSINKI

The first Stakeholders' Day of the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) took place on Friday 10th of October in Helsinki. Around 300 representatives of stakeholders' organisations met with ECHA staff in the Finlandia Hall to hear the latest news on the REACH process and to provide the Agency with feedback and proposals. In his opening speech, the Executive Director of ECHA Geert Dancet emphasized this recurring event as an important channel for dialogue between the Agency and its partners. Stakeholders from all over the world included representatives from industry organisations, member state authorities, third countries, NGOs and companies, including WSP Group.

The morning session focused on ECHA's proceedings and provided participants with up-to-date information on pre-registration, registration and the forthcoming candidate list of Substances of Very High Concern. Pre-registration is now well under way with around 400 000 pre-registrations, representing 40 000 substances, submitted by the beginning of October. ECHA Director Christel Musset evaluates that only about 150 000 of these pre-registrations can be considered valid, i.e. representing substances currently on the EU market. The rest have been registered by companies as a precaution. However, the Agency is strongly requesting companies only to register those substances they really intend to register, as a large number of "ghost" pre-registrations leads to problems such as downstream user uncertainty over substances about to be registered, IT overload as well as low functionality of the Substance Information Exchange Forums. A slowing down of the REACH-IT system can already be seen, Leo Heezen of the European Chemical Industry Council pointed out. This is due to the fact that traffic on REACH-IT has increased greatly as the pre-registration deadline of 1st December approaches. But ECHA staff guarantees that the IT systems will hold.

It is not only pre-registration and registration that has industry worried. Another major process of the REACH system will start rolling once the candidate list is officially released at the end of October this year. It seems that obligations related to the candidate list are less known than the pre-registration deadline. NGO representatives attending the Stakeholder day assured they will do their best in raising awareness to the issue, including launching campaigns on consumers' rights to receive information on SVHCs in articles within 45 days upon giving such a request.

Much time had been reserved during the day for questions and answers but, unfortunately, some questions regarding the interpretation of the regulation remain unclear. These included questions on re-imported preparations, pre-registration of waste, and the possible deactivation and activation of pre-registrations.

The afternoon session was devoted to the theme of ECHA's dialogue and communication with its stakeholders. ECHA stressed that there has been a lot of activity lately in trying to include third countries in the REACH process. Upcoming projects include translating REACH documents to other languages such as Russian and Chinese, as well as training non-EU companies with the help of local industry organizations. But, as Executive Director Geert Dancet stated in his closing remarks, everybody's effort is needed in the last month in order to reach the unreachable. Industry has an important role to play when it comes to putting pressure on their suppliers and to communicate REACH obligations to non-EU suppliers. Good communication, feedback and open dialogue are key issues when it comes to implementing REACH through the entire supply chain in an efficient manner.

All in all, the first Stakeholders' Day was a success. It provided persons involved in REACH matters with an excellent opportunity to meet ECHA staff and other REACH stakeholders. The discussion was lively both during the Q&A -sessions and during coffee and lunch breaks. While it seems that many are concerned with the practicalities of REACH, such as the interpretations of certain parts of the regulation, the workability of the SIEFs and the implications and future of the Candidate List, most seem keen on soon taking the first practical steps in the long REACH registration process. Stakeholder events such as this one go a long way in supporting REACH implementation in a transparent and communicative manner. The next Stakeholders' Day will take place in connection with the Helsinki Chemicals Forum on the 27th of May 2009.

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