



**Calling on decision-makers to abide by due processes.**

**Summary of REACHforLIFE Launch Event**  
**“Safety, Coherence, Balance: Is the EU’s chemicals policy living up to these principles?”**  
**Bibliothèque Solvay, Brussels**  
**10 September 2008**

**Introduction**

Following the success of the REACHforLIFE launch event on 10 September in Brussels, we are pleased to present a summary of the discussions and the main points which were expressed by the six panelists and members of the audience.

We would like to emphasise that this document reflects REACHforLIFE’s interpretation of the debate, and of course the panelists are free to present their own version of events. However, we have striven to provide a fair and balanced view in this summary and have not intended to give favour to any particular side.

The objective of the event was to bring stakeholders from all sides of this debate to engage in a full and frank discussion concerning three main aspects:

- The declining role of science and the consequences on long term consumer safety;
- The need for overall coherence in legislation;
- The need to properly balance risks with benefits.

We were delighted with the turn out and look forward to continue discussions with decision-makers, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders to ensure that this critical issue remains in the public domain.

## Summary

The REACHforLIFE launch event was opened by **Frédéric Simon, Managing Editor, Euractiv**, who introduced the panelists and companies behind the REACHforLIFE campaign. He stated that, as a journalist, he had thought the debate on REACH was over, whereas as time went on he was finding out that it was only just beginning.

**Willem Hofland, Spokesperson for REACHforLIFE**, introduced the REACHforLIFE campaign and the background to its formation. He reiterated REACHforLIFE's call for decision-makers to play by the rules all parties agreed upon when they formulate chemical policy and to work within the framework of REACH. He reminded those interested to sign the REACHforLIFE petition calling for science-based policymaking and ended by putting forward the following discussion points:

1. Decision-makers are putting consumers and the environment at more risk by banning safe chemicals rather than keeping them on the market; and
2. REACH is the most comprehensive legislative framework in the world governing chemicals. Yet if we continue to ban chemicals outside of the risk assessment context, all the time and effort spent on discussing and achieving an agreement on REACH would have been wasted.

In his slide presentation **Prof. Dr. Martin van den Berg, Professor of Toxicology and Deputy Director of the Institute of Risk Assessment Sciences at the University of Utrecht**, referred to the often misrepresented manner in which toxicity was communicated and criticised the lack of objectivity which often accompanies risk assessments. He ended by saying how the precautionary principle is often invoked by NGOs as a way to scare the public, rather than as a basis for sound science related to dose response relationships.

The next presentation was given by **Axel Singhofen, Adviser on Health and Environment Policy for the Greens/EFA political group in the European Parliament**, who gave his own interpretation of the REACHforLIFE objectives, namely that the companies behind the campaign wanted to overturn the current ban on deca-BDE and prevent possible future bans on brominated flame retardants. He alleged that the campaign was misrepresenting the science and the legal position on deca-BDE. He also emphasised that in his view the positions held by the REACHforLIFE companies are not supported by any of the three EU institutions, the scientific community, nor the rest of the chemical industry.

**Dr. Jürgen Troitzsch from the Fire and Environment Protection Service and a Fire Safety Expert**, made the point that flame retardants can play a part in fire safety, especially since in recent years there has been an increase in the use of combustible materials in homes and workplaces. According to Dr. Troitzsch, flame retardants reduce the risk of fire, and he reminded the audience that there is no such thing as an environmentally-friendly fire, given the fact that harmful substances with short-term and long-term adverse effects on health and the environment are always emitted in such a process. In his view the ban on deca-BDE should not have been allowed to be passed.

**Martin Margodt, President of the European Burn Casualties Association**, clarified that he was not in favour of any particular flame retardant and is neither on the side of industry nor green groups. What he cared about were burn victims. He did however highlight some numbers regarding burn casualties, namely that flame retardants can potentially save 800 to 1000<sup>1</sup> people in Europe each year, and he commented that that it costs between €2,100 and €2,200<sup>2</sup> to keep a burn sufferer in intensive care for 24 hours.

**Chris White, Editor of EU Reporter**, admitted that he was no scientist and said he had nothing against the greens in principle, but he nonetheless took a broader sweep of the issue and questioned good governance in the EU across the board, suggesting that with regard to chemicals and indeed energy policy due process was not being followed.

Following the panelists' contributions, there was a lively debate which took in both the issue of the deca-BDE ban in the EU and the wider issue of the role of risk assessment conclusions in EU chemicals policy.

**Willem Hofland** opened the debate by saying that this was not a discussion about deca-BDE, neither was it a discussion about brominated flame retardants, but that it was a discussion about chemicals being banned which have a positive risk assessment.

In response to **Willem Hofland** who had argued that the European Court of Justice (ECJ) had banned deca-BDE from electric and electronic applications for "procedural reasons", **Axel Singhofen** gave a rundown of the recent history concerning the deca-BDE ban in the EU institutions. In particular, he stated that

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<sup>1</sup> Figure provided by the European Burn Casualties Association

<sup>2</sup> Figure provided by the European Burn Casualties Association

the European Commission had overstepped its mandate when exempting deca-BDE, which was the motivation behind the ECJ's judgement.

**Prof. Dr. van der Berg** suggested that the EU risk assessment for deca-BDE should have considered neurotoxicity. However, he observed that levels of deca-BDE detected so far in the environment are so small that they are unlikely to cause that kind of effect. Prof. van der Berg stated that, although levels of deca-BDE have been found in polar bears, the findings were minimal and no cause for concern. He also referred to the Paracelsus principle that, 'the dose makes the poison', and went on to say that finding a compound in an organism does not automatically imply a risk, and that thus far he had not seen a single report by an NGO which properly assessed the issue of toxicity based on dose effect-relationships.

The debate was opened up to the floor and the panelists fielded a number of questions concerning the issue of risk assessments in EU chemicals policy.

During the discussion, **Willem Hofland** emphasised that deca-BDE, the properties of which had been identified during risk assessment as needing no labeling, is a product which is not labeled and has no hazard warning requirements, in accordance with the relevant legal framework. He mentioned that, despite this, deca-BDE uses were covered by the Voluntary Emissions Control Action Programme (VECAP) established by the brominated flame retardant industry, as an example of what industry, in collaboration with downstream users, was doing to reduce harmful emissions. This is even regarding products that were not required to be labeled in the supply chain.

**Axel Singhofen** criticised VECAP, claiming it was another example of industry attempting to avoid regulations and that the program was only covering the manufacturing supply chain, not the end of life phase of manufactured products. He admitted that there were indeed a number of grey areas with regard to chemical policy as a whole. Referring to the precautionary principle, he stated that in his view politicians need to take responsibility in cases of uncertain science and expressed surprise that no member of the European Commission was present at the event.

**K. Kannah, REACHforLIFE spokesperson**, responded from the floor that the Commission had been invited to be a panelist at the REACHforLIFE launch event but had declined to take part. He also pointed out that the ECJ had ruled on a question of competence of one of the EU institutions – a point agreed upon

by Axel Singhofen – and had not pronounced judgment on the science of deca-BDE.

**Chris White** brought up the issue of alternatives, specifically the lack of knowledge about certain types put forward by some pressure groups and the possible problems associated with using such alternatives. He gave the example of a soap produced in the UK which no longer contained phosphates but which was now experiencing problems with the alternative substances used instead of phosphates.

In the same vein, **Willem Hofland** challenged claims from various green groups that all halogen-free alternatives for brominated flame retardants are “automatically good.” **Axel Singhofen** in response claimed that some members of the panel were suffering from “green paranoia”, an accusation strongly refuted by **Chris White** who said he was not on a crusade against green groups but that in his view there was a need for proper ordered governance in the EU as a whole.

**Prof. Dr. van den Berg** drew attention to the apparent contradiction in the conclusions of the Deca-BDE risk assessment, namely that no problematic properties were identified to date but that more information was required. He also asserted that the additional scientific research is ongoing that relates to the current situation of deca-BDE, a substance which cannot be used in certain applications because of a law that was adopted before the risk assessment conclusions were made available. He also said that he was the coordinator of a ten-year EU monitoring programme for deca-BDE to see if it bioaccumulates in the human body, yet was having problems convincing the medical-ethical committee that this research is really necessary. In any case the compound is now banned so they may as well halt their program tomorrow. Willem Hofland added that the RoHS directive was only targeting deca-BDE equipment in E&E equipment.

A valuable contribution from the floor reminded those present that currently, unlike in the US, most televisions in Europe are not flame retarded, and that environmental lobbyists had managed to prevent the adoption of a standard at the international level which would have increased the fire safety of such products. The speaker questioned why NGOs were campaigning against fire-safe television sets and fire-safety in general. He argued that although there might be alternatives to certain brominated flame retardants available, it was not always possible to use them in identical applications.

**Willem Hofland** concluded by saying that we have a European legislative system - REACH – and everything that passes REACH should be allowed to be used, and that bans should not be instigated through the backdoor.

### **Conclusion**

Following the article a number of media articles were published, a selection of which are accessible below.

We would like to thank all the panelists for making the REACHforLIFE launch event such a success and look forward to continuing the debate in the near future.

See also:

[Flame Retardant Firms Urge Fairness on Chemicals](#) – ENDS Europe – 10 September 2008 (Subscription required for access to article. REACHforLIFE can supply the article upon request.)

[Chemical Activists Question EU Scientific Risk Assessments](#) – Euractiv – 12 September 2008

[Precautionary Principle versus Scientific Evidence](#) – European Agenda – 19 September 2008

Unfair Chemical Ban is Bad Governance – EU Reporter – Autumn 2008 (to be uploaded as a PDF on [www.reachforlife.eu](http://www.reachforlife.eu)).

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