

**Presentation at the REACHforLIFE Launch Event, 10 September 2008**

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Good morning everybody and, as has already been announced, I would like to say some words about fire safety. Fire safety is an integral part of legislation for all countries with the aim of avoiding fire casualties and property losses.

Worldwide, the legislators aim at providing fire safety in fields relevant to citizens, the most important of which are building and transportation. We have fire safety requirements for materials and components used in different applications inside and outside of buildings, as well as in transportation means, and last but not least in electrical engineering and electronic applications.

So, why do we have all these fire protection measures? There is a very simple explanation: in the last 100 years, the wealth of the industrialised countries grew tremendously, and this is due to the use of combustible materials. You can measure the wealth of a country by the use of combustible materials. If you look back ten thousand years, everybody lived in caves or sat on stones so that was no need for fire safety. Nothing in these "buildings" was combustible; what we have now is a huge amount of combustible products surrounding us and here something has to be done.

The legislators said okay we need to protect humans and also property; this is the reason why these fire safety regulations were developed. How can we settle fire safety problems arising from the use of combustible materials? One way is the use of flame retardants, because this is the most economic way to provide a basic fire safety level, and it allows us to maintain the comfort level we are accustomed to. As I said already, ten thousand years ago, we sat on stones and now we sit in armchairs, and work with computers. All of this is combustible, and we have to do something to ensure an adequate fire safety standard.

So what is the role of flame retardants? Their role is to reduce the risk of a fire starting by very small ignition sources such as glowing cigarettes, matches or similar items. If nothing is flame retarded, a blaze can develop within minutes and people may die or be heavily injured. Therefore, these catastrophes have to be prevented as far as is possible. The other point is to reduce, once the fire is declared, fire propagation because if the fire does not propagate too rapidly you still have the possibility to escape. These are the two main benefits of flame retardants which help to protect life, health, property and in the end the environment because, they help to avoid fires. All fires produce a multitude of toxic products which will harm humans and the environment. There are no environmentally friendly fires.

So, on the one hand, flame retardants help to prevent fires, but on the other hand they are chemicals and they have to comply with environmental and health criteria –

this is quite clear. To date, besides the comprehensive work done by industry, risk assessments for flame retardants have been carried out in the frame of existing chemicals. Here, these compounds are considered as chemicals rather than as flame retardants.

Now we come now to the point we discuss today: the famous ban of decabromodiphenyl ether (deca-BDE). We just heard that deca-BDE, which has come under environmental suspicion since many years, turned out to be a good product in the conclusions of the Risk Assessment. However, there are still some points that have to be looked at. I'm fine with that.

The other point under discussion is to ban a chemical for formal reasons, as this has been done in the RoHS (reduction of hazardous substances) Directive for electrical products by revoking the exemption of deca.

To me, the problem here is not with deca-BDE, it is more general in that chemicals may be banned on formal and not on scientific grounds. If there is a scientific background for a ban, I will fully support it. However, if chemicals are withdrawn only for formal reasons, then what is REACH for? Will it be possible to just ban chemicals without caring about REACH? I hope this will never happen.

It is my fear that this approach may question the future use of many flame retardants. Flame retardants are chemicals and their fundamental role is to prevent fires, and to delay fire propagation of a fire for saving lives, protect property and last but not least the environment.

I conclude now and my message is to make sure that fire safety which is beneficial to our society may not be impeded by banning flame retardants on formal and not on scientific grounds.

Thank you