

PRESS RELEASE



Health and Environment groups on alert for test case on chemical safety

March 15, 2005

A hazardous chemical is likely to be accepted as “safe for consumer use” by the European Commission this week. Deca-BDE, which is used as a flame retardant for electrical goods and textiles and is found as a contaminant in food, is known to accumulate in the human body when ingested. If Deca-BDE is accepted as safe, confidence in the EU’s proposed chemical safety legislation, known as REACH, will be completely undermined, according to three leading public health organizations in Europe and the US.

Commission and Member State chemicals civil servants meet on March 17 to formulate their recommendations on the basis of two risk assessments of the controversial flame retardant chemical, Deca-BDE. A new critique released today challenges the ‘sound science’ on which authorities conclude the chemical is safe for ongoing consumer use. The critique¹ is released the same week that EU member states meet to review recommendations on risk assessment with REACH.

Deca-BDE, a brominated flame retardant commonly used in electronic products and textiles, is set to be given the green light for ongoing use, despite ongoing concerns about the effect of this chemical on children's brain development which are substantial enough to warrant further testing for developmental neurotoxicity, and in the face of mounting evidence of its widespread contamination in humans and the environment. In May 2004, the UK rapporteur released the Final Environmental Draft of the Risk Assessment and concluded that there was no need for further risk reduction efforts for this chemical while further information is gathered, even though the supposed cautionary risk assessment significantly underestimated actual industrial emissions. In February 2005, the French rapporteur released a new Human Health Draft of the Risk Assessment of Deca-BDE, which concluded no further risk reduction measures were needed for consumer exposure, but that further data is required for exposure in workers and humans exposed via the environment.

The critique released by the European Public Health Alliance - Environment Network (EEN) and Clean Production Action outlines the consistent bias in the European reports to allow ongoing use of the chemical even though the rapporteurs admit there is insufficient basis on which to

¹ Kaatz Chary, Lin and Rossi, Mark (2005) Comments on the E.U. Risk Assessment on Bis (Pentabromodiphenyl) Ether (Decabromodiphenyl Ether) Clean Production Action and European Public Health Alliance – Environment Network.

pronounce the chemical safe. In one instance the risk to humans from ingestion, according to the French Human Health Draft risk assessment, is concluded to be from eating 'food root crops' even though a study of 30 food types found Deca-BDE the dominant chemical contaminant in many other foods such as soy formula, cheese, margarine and calf liver.² Several studies have now found high levels of Deca-BDE in the dust of offices, homes and other indoor areas and now in the dryer lint of homes in the US. The rapporteurs even acknowledge that "*products in use are an emission source for indoor exposure and can explain in some extent the widespread presence of PBDE in the environment.*" Yet in every single case where conclusions are drawn in both the Final Environmental Draft of May 2004 and the Human Health Draft of February 2005, they have opted to protect the use of Deca-BDE.

"Why did the chemical experts not rule on the side of precaution - particularly by investigating and requiring the use of safer substitutes?" asks Genon Jensen, Director of EEN. "This kind of risk assessment poses important questions about the extent to which Europe can be effective in reforming its chemicals management under REACH – why should we think REACH will offer improved health protection to European citizens when decisions will be based on this kind of risk assessment?"

The Sacconi report on REACH being discussed in the European Parliament this week as well as Council discussions have not taken into consideration how the risk assessment process could provide better protection for vulnerable groups in relation to health outcomes such as children's brain development.³

"The Bromine Science and Environment Forum has been lobbying against proposed State bans of PBDE in the United States claiming the EU has already pronounced Deca-BDE to be safe," added Beverley Thorpe of Clean Production Action. "It's unfortunate that the US chemical industry has chosen this example to showcase European regulations," she added.

END

Notes: Meeting 17th March - 9th Risk Reduction Strategy Meeting of the Member States for the Implementation of Council Regulation (EEC) 793/93 on the Evaluation and Control of Risks of Existing Substances.

For further information contact:

Christian Farrar-Hockley, European Public Health Alliance - Environment Network Tel: +32 2 233 3874 christian@env-health.org, <http://www.env-health.org>

Beverley Thorpe, Clean Production Action. Tel: +1 514 484 8647 Bev@cleanproduction.org www.cleanproduction.org

Karolina Ruzickova, Health Care Without Harm. <http://www.norharm.org>

WWF, the global conservation organisation, endorses the content of the critique on Deca-BDE released by the European Public Health Alliance - Environment Network and Clean Production Action.

Clean Production Action, a US-based non profit consultancy, partners with environmental organizations, public health advocates, labour unions and community groups around the world to develop and build technical support for clean production policies.

²Schechter, Arnold, Papke, Olaf, Tung, Kuang-Chi, Staskal, Daniele, and Birnbaum, Linda. (2004) Polybrominated Diphenyl Ethers Contamination of United States Food. Environ. Sci. Technol. 38: 5306-5311.

³Children's special health vulnerability to environmental hazards and REACH, 7th December 2004 <http://www.env-health.org/a/1529>

European Public Health Alliance - Environment Network is an international non-governmental organizations advocating environmental protection as a means to improving health and well-being.
Health Care Without Harm is an international coalition of 433 organizations in 52 countries working to transform the health care industry so it is no longer a source of harm to people and the environment.