



PRESS RELEASE

PFAS COMMISSIONER FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF FLANDERS, KARL VRANCKEN

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PFAS COMMISSIONER CONCLUDES CRISIS WITH 50 CONCRETE ACTIONS IN NEW PFAS ACTION PLAN COMPANIES MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR PRODUCTS THEY PUT ON THE MARKET

- PFAS commissioner's final report emphasizes importance of circular system
- Flemish government ready to switch to broader policy on substances of very high concern
- New standards framework for PFAS in soil and groundwater remediation

Nineteen months after he was appointed by the Flemish government, PFAS commissioner Karl Vrancken submits his final report. In this report, he calls for urgent work on a comprehensive, circular system approach that takes PFAS into account in all steps. "In the circular system there must be safe discharge points, or 'safe sinks' for the contaminating or harmful components. In this way, we ensure that PFAS do not continue to circulate in an uncontrolled way in materials and in the system. At the same time, we must avoid developing a tunnel vision on PFAS, where removing PFAS from our environment would just create negative side effects on the environment," Vrancken says.

The PFAS crisis was an issue at different levels. In Zwijndrecht there was a very concrete and urgent need for solutions. Stopping a major part of the PFAS production at 3M and reducing emissions was a first important step. Starting the remediation process was another. And at the same time, the Oosterweel project was thoroughly rethought so that remediation, work and health protection could coexist in a much better balance.

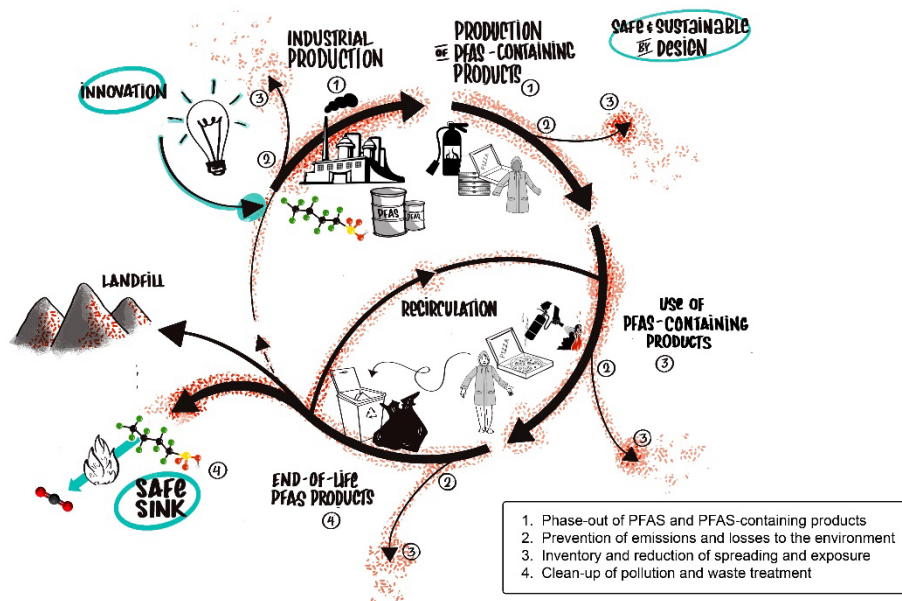
At the Flemish level, the new standards framework for remediation and soil movement is a real milestone. At the same time, within the Flemish government, the PFAS Action Plan introduces a common vision and strategy around dealing with PFAS, to be extended later to other substances of very high concern.

And at the level of general interest, Flanders has, through the broad knowledge development of the past few months, taken a particularly prominent place in the European debate on the phasing out and substitution of PFAS. This has also sent an important signal to the industry: it is now up to them to work on alternatives to PFAS and PFAS-free products.

Circularity and impact of persistent chemicals

Within circular systems, the exposure risks and health effects of materials are a major challenge for our companies. Karl Vrancken: "Companies need to be aware of the chemicals they use and the effect they have on the users of their products. They should not wait for regulations or obligations from the government. We really need to leave behind the idea that a producer can put a product on the market and then not care what happens to it in society. The PFAS action plan offers tools to take important and necessary steps. But there still remains a lot of work to do to activate the industry."

But this approach requires an achievable and realistic framework, the PFAS commissioner emphasizes. "If we set standards based solely on toxicological criteria, companies may have to take measures that go beyond technical or economic feasibility. We must also take into account possible cross-media effects such as higher CO₂ emissions, higher energy consumption, less material recycling. Especially if the added value is very limited, if the real environmental gain is minimal and there are hardly any effects on reducing health risks. In other words, we have to make sure that the balance between technical/economic feasibility and maximum environmental protection is balanced."



In this way, PFAS should have its place within a circular system, provided that it is linked with a systemic policy that intervenes at the different steps in the production and consumption cycle. The objective here remains to minimize the impact on the environment and health.

That policy consists of 4 perspectives:

1. Phasing out PFAS and PFAS-containing products;
2. Preventing or reducing emissions and losses of PFAS to the environment;
3. Identifying and minimizing the spread of contamination and exposure of the population, fauna and flora;
4. Remediating contaminated sites and the treatment or disposal of waste materials.

New regulatory framework for PFAS

The Flemish government also approved a new regulatory framework for PFAS in soil and groundwater remediation. In a next step, this regulatory framework will go into public consultation, where it will be submitted to the Flemish stakeholder panels on environment and socio-economic affairs.

This framework provides new assessment values to determine whether or not soil should be considered as contaminated. For the reuse of excavated soil, the framework determines what quality the excavated soil must be in order to allow reuse as soil without restrictions. The standards for targeted reuse in construction works are based on the extent of PFAS leaching to groundwater rather than the PFAS concentration present in the soil.

PFAS Action Plan

The Flemish government had a PFAS Action Plan as early as 2019. The acute PFAS crisis in 2021 and the experiences and knowledge gained in recent months, as well as the improved approach and functioning around PFAS within the administrations, provided a necessary revision of this plan.

The plan includes 50 concrete actions around the policy perspectives mentioned above, as well as public health improvement, knowledge development and knowledge sharing.

Moreover, the updated PFAS Action Plan should be a stepping stone for a broader policy approach to the family of substances of very high concern. These are (chemical) substances characterized by their persistence, mobility, and toxicity. Think for example of pesticides, flame retardants or plasticizers that may have a similar impact as PFAS on humans and the environment.

This is why the Flemish government is already working on policy initiatives on these substances of very high concern. In line with the recommendation of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission, the Flemish government wants develop an integrated long-term vision for a Flemish policy, supported by the newly established Hub for Substances of Very High Concern (Hub ZZS).

Full circle?

PFAS commissioner Karl Vrancken concludes, "My PFAS mission has come to an end but the PFAS circle is not yet complete. Major challenges remain to sustainably manage the production, use and disposal of PFAS-containing products with consideration for the health of nature and humans. The great steps forward that have been made over the past year and a half, with the commitment of many stakeholders, have caused a deflection of the trajectory. We have shifted toward a more sustainable management of substances of very high concern. I am confident that the Flemish government, driven by the many experts and in close cooperation with science, will steadily and ambitiously continue this trajectory towards a model of sustainable production and sustainable consumption."

Contact (for media only):

Karl Vrancken

PFAS Commissioner

E.: karl.vrancken@vlaanderen.be

M.: +32 479 97 90 41