

Report

Tackling PFAS pollution & Launch Knowledge Center Innovative Remediation Solutions

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Moderator: Jan Hautekiet

Reporterr: Chris Lambert (dOMG)

Subject: Plenary Day 1: TACKLING PFAS POLLUTION: A PRO-ACTIVE AND SYSTEMIC APPROACH

1 PLENARY 1 FEBRUARY 2024: TACKLING PFAS POLLUTION: A PRO-ACTIVE AND SYSTEMIC APPROACH

The session started with a short video explaining the PFAS issue and the urgency to tackle its impact on health and environment.

It was followed by a video declaration of the Flemish Minister Zuhail Demir, who was excused due to unforeseeable family matters.

The introduction by Hans Reynders, Programme Manager Substances of Very High Concern of the Flemish Environment & Spatial Development Department explained that since the Flemish PFAS-crisis now 2.5 years later, we've come a long way. Since then we have built up a great deal of knowledge. And we are happy to share that knowledge at this PFAS event in Antwerp. Our efforts involved all parties not only to drastically limit the impact on our health and the environment but also to bring the industry to insights and action. The PFAS-crisis was certainly a turning point, but the enormous challenge of substances of very high concern still awaits us. He indicated that it is up to us to extend the lessons of PFAS. The PFAS-event also aims to learn from each other and to see what knowledge is still missing. He wondered what research is being conducted that could be relevant to us all?

Aurel Ciobanu-Dordea, Director of the Directorate Circular Economy of the European Commission, DG Environment explained that the European Commission is ready to deliver in implementing the PFAS Action Plan as part of the European Chemical Strategy for sustainability. He advocated to be in favour of a systemic

and proactive approach upstream and downstream. On the proposed Universal PFAS restriction (within REACH), as proposed by four EU Member States and Norway, he indicated that in his view no unlimited permanent derogations seem to be needed ... but at the moment this is still too early to say. A follow-up question by the moderator wondered if the postponement of the revision of the REACH Regulation could hamper the implementing of the EU actions concerning PFAS. Director Ciobanu-Dordea reassured that this would not be the case as that revision is not needed to finalise the needed restrictions to tackle the impact of PFAS. But the postponement provides more time to elaborate a better REACH Revision proposal.

Loren Denton (US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)) followed this with an interesting presentation on U.S. EPA's PFAS Strategic Roadmap. One of the key issues he highlighted was the need to realise to integrate all relevant info concerning the PFAS use and emissions in the permits. Advancing the science of PFAS toxicity, exposures, and methods was also an important part of their PFAS roadmap accomplishments, he also indicated the PFAS analytic tools of US EPA. In a follow-up question the moderator asked if the approach in the Flemish Region and the EU also helps to tackle the impact of PFAS in the US? Loren Denton recalled the visit on PFAS by Flemish Minister Zuhair Demir to the US, a visit that he assisted then. He stressed the need to keep sharing information back and forth on several issues, and this already because of the presence of PFAS products and with PFAS linked firms on the territory of the US, the EU and beyond. In this respect he also referred to the topic of the toxicity levels.

After the presentations the moderator initiated a panel discussion with the three panel members, namely: Marleen Pauwels, CEFIC Executive Director of the Halogens Industry Sector; Patrick ten Brink, EEB Secretary General; and Hans Reynders, Flemish Programme Manager Substances of Very High Concern.

The moderator asked Patrick ten Brink about the news on the EEB's initiative to blood-test PFAS on high-level European politicians. He wanted to learn about the reasons why the EEB had initiated this initiative and the lessons they have learned.

Patrick ten Brink explained that of the 13 persons tested all appeared to be contaminated with several of the analysed PFAS. Five politicians exceeded current 'safety' levels. The EEB wanted to show to decision makers that the impact of PFAS is real, and also to indicate the urgent need to act on this issue. He also explained that PFAS have been linked to serious health issues including cancer, infertility, birth defects and immune system disruptions, and that almost 16 million Europeans are estimated to suffer from medical conditions caused by PFAS exposure.

The moderator explained that PFAS has learned us that scientific knowledge about substances of concern may evolve very rapidly, leading to very strong reductions of levels that are believed to be safe to man or the environment, and thus causing strong reductions in environmental standards. How can we best deal with such an evolution?

Marleen Pauwels indicated the need to invest in green chemistry. In the phase of the design a good consideration of possible health and environmental effects should be integrated. This way we should be able to avoid unacceptable impacts from the beginning. She also referred to bootcamps for engineers as one of the instruments to achieve this.

The moderator then asked if the precautionary principle, as outlined within the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, already provides a sufficient legal justification for the phase out of PFAS based on their very persistent properties?

Hans Reynders hoped this would be clarified during the elaboration of the PFAS REACH restrictions. The arguments provided by the ECHA committees and the position of the European Commission could be important elements for this. At the moment there are not so many examples yet.

The following question by the moderator to the panel was if they consider that some PFAS uses should be (temporarily) allowed to continue based on their importance to society (provided that emissions are limited as much as possible)? And which uses should be considered as such?

Marleen Pauwels explained that every sector is now screening where they have an alternative to substitute PFAS for certain uses and products. If no alternative seems to be there at the moment, she indicated that in her opinion society will then have to decide if a certain PFAS use is so important that it needs to continue.

Daan Molenaar (Director Regulation at DCMR Environmental Protection Agency Rotterdam Rijnmond) made the case of the historic responsibility for the pollution by PFAS, and asked for the position of CEFIC on this. Marleen Pauwels replied that CEFIC was not able to give an answer to this as there is a need for a case to case analysis to define the specific responsibilities.

Stefan Scheuer of CHEM Trust referred to the problem of PFAS contamination of the drinking water. He warned that we could lose our trust in safe drinking water, and how could we prevent this from happening?

Hans Reynders reassured that at the moment the EFSA limit values were not exceeded in the Flemish Region, and the drinking water is still very safe. The extensive monitoring will continue to safeguard this in the future.

Patrick ten Brink explained that at the EU level important measures will need to be developed as fast as we can to reduce the impact of PFAS. He made the case for restrictions for PFAS that would only still allow it for essential use only, and he saw no reason for granting permanent derogations to continue certain uses. We also need to limit the PFAS emissions faster, and make sure of a elaborated clean up of historic pollution. He referred to inspections, monitoring and science to tackle further PFAS emissions and PFAS pollution.

Asli Tamer Vestlund (Change Chemistry) also explained that many of the products with PFAS that we are now used to in our daily lives were not there before we had PFAS, and we should ask ourselves if they are really so essential. She saw a need for more public awareness on this. Patrick ten Brink supported this and specified that more convenience provided by a product with PFAS does not mean that such a use should be considered to be essential. But he also indicated that a lot of alternatives for PFAS are already there and work for different uses.

Toby De Backer (Cabinet of Flemish Minister Zuhair Demir) wanted to know how industry looks at the several measures they need to respect to limit their emissions. Marleen Pauwels reassured that industry is ready to invest to limit its emissions, to integrate more filters, and to deal with the waste issues caused by PFAS.

The closing statement was presented by Toby De Backer, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Cabinet of the Flemish Minister of the Environment.

He expressed his gratitude towards the several Flemish administrations involved to deal with the Flemish PFAS crisis (starting at the polluted 3M site in Zwijndrecht which was showing a very high level of PFAS-pollution), as they did a great job under huge pressure. He also thanked the NGOs for defending their views even if this sometimes resulted in harsh confrontations with the policy makers. He explained that the thorough work by the Inquiry Commission of the Flemish Parliament on PFAS also resulted in good politics. The 58 recommendations of this Commission are taken on board in our policies now and should prevent similar

situations in the future as assessing also other Substances of Very High Concern than PFAS is included as a priority issue.

He also explained that 3M is guaranteed to pay for the clean-up in Zwijndrecht, and will also contribute to tackle the impact of PFAS.

To tackle the several problems that still exist due to the impact by PFAS the Flemish Region has further added a lot of policy actions to its PFAS Action plan. One of the actions was the establishment of KIS which will give a further boost for innovation so remediation and purification of PFAS pollution becomes better and cheaper. He acknowledges that there still remains a lot to do but that we have now a PFAS action Plan that enables us to deal with it. Within the EU, the US and beyond many are struggling with the same problems linked to PFAS. He realizes that there is still a long way to go. The need for far going PFAS restrictions at EU level was highlighted, and also the need for extended responsibility (not only for PFAS). He made an appeal to resist the powerful PFAS-lobbies to further tackle the impact of PFAS.

ANNEX 1 - PRESENTATIONS:

- US EPA _ Loren Denton
- European Commission, DG Environment _ Aurel Ciobanu-Dordea