

# REACH & CLP Hub: How REACH will help drive the move to a circular economy in Europe

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Tracking harmful chemicals – and helping industry make both a shift in direction and right materials choices – will be key to accelerating the transition towards circularity, says REACHLaw CMO and business development specialist Ingrid Sekki



There is no question that circularity is moving to the top of the corporate agenda. It also lies at the core of the EU's current industrial strategy. In March, the Commission published the [European Green Deal](#), the EU's new strategy for sustainable growth which aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 as well as a resource-efficient, globally competitive and digitalised economy.

To fulfil this ambition, and to help with implementing the goals of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, the EU aims to accelerate the transition towards a circular economy model that gives back to the planet more than it takes.

The circular economy action plan ([CEAP](#)) was published in March as one of the main building blocks of Europe's Green Deal. The plan sets out actions to achieve a cleaner and more competitive Europe, while building on those implemented since the publication of the EU's first action plan in 2015.

One of the aims of the new CEAP is to make sustainable products the norm in the EU by strengthening the policy framework to establish such principles for all products. Priority will be given to the so-called high-impact product groups such as electronics and ICT, batteries and vehicles, packaging, plastics and textiles. The Commission will include measures to empower consumers to play a more active role in the circular economy so that they make

sustainable choices and encourage industry to make changes in that direction.

The Commission is also seeking to enhance circularity in the context of a toxic-free environment. To achieve this, EU chemicals legislation such as REACH is playing a key role by encouraging the progressive substitution of substances of very high concern (SVHCs) in order to protect human health and the environment.

To prevent banned substances re-entering the market via recycling, it plans to adopt a chemicals strategy for sustainability during the third quarter of this year. This will further address the interface between chemicals, products and waste legislation in order to increase confidence in using secondary raw materials. It also aims to reduce the risks associated with the production and use of chemicals, as well as encouraging the development of safe and sustainable alternatives.

## The role of REACH

Chemicals will continue to play a significant role in achieving the EU's ambitious political agenda because circularity can only be achieved with sustainable substances. Tracking harmful chemicals is fundamental to accelerating the transition towards circularity as it helps industry to make the right materials choices.

Thanks to REACH, as of today we have information on more than 21,000 chemicals that have been placed on the EU market. However, the work of collecting data is not complete and Echa, as part of its 2020-23 strategy, is committed to spurring companies to plug the gaps in safety data and ensuring they comply with chemicals legislation.

At the same time, Echa will continue assessing chemicals in groups to identify the right regulatory actions and move towards a 'one substance-one assessment' approach to better support industry towards circularity.

The aim of the REACH Regulation is to ensure a high level of protection for human health and the environment, as well as smooth working of the EU internal market. At the same time, the Regulation enhances competitiveness and innovation by promoting substitution of SVHCs. In an interview last year with [Chemical Watch](#), Echa executive director Björn Hansen explained that REACH is striving for the "perfect world" of a comprehensive, consistently accurate database of information on chemicals that will allow manufacturers to make the right choices of materials, using tools based on predictive toxicology to assess in advance their potential impacts in different applications. There is still a lot of work to do and in light of the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, the agency is working to ensure the following approaches are in practice by 2023:

- identification and risk management of substances of concern;
- safe and sustainable use of chemicals by industry; and
- sustainable management of chemicals through the implementation of EU legislation.

Echa hopes that by 2023 REACH registration dossiers will be up-to-date and contain appropriate and complete data covering the hazards and uses of substances, allowing them to be adequately classified, labelled and used safely. Companies will then be able to use this information in substituting SVHCs and, in the process advancing innovation.

In addition, the agency aims to conclude which high-volume substances (above ten tonnes a year) are a high priority for regulatory risk management, a low priority for further regulatory action, and which require more data to be generated.

Effective regulatory risk management of the most hazardous chemicals is also key to circularity. And making the processes of REACH authorisation and restriction as effective as possible will facilitate the Commission's

decision making. In addition, effective communication up and down the supply chain will improve knowledge of the substances present in articles and their safe use among customers as well as encouraging substitution.

One of the aims of the new CEAP is creating a well-functioning EU market for secondary raw materials. And the Commission will make timely use of the restrictions on the use of SVHCs in articles, where the use of the substance is subject to a REACH authorisation requirement. The REACH Regulation creates obligations, but at the same time provides incentives for industry to replace such substances with safer alternatives.

Consumers and citizens play an important part in the new action plan. So it is vital that in future all information about chemicals is both reliable and freely available to them as well as regulators, stakeholders and businesses, allowing informed choices on the use of chemicals – not only in the EU but around the world.

## Leading global efforts

The EU will continue to lead at a global level in the development of a circular economy. It must support companies in making sustainable products, services and business models the norm. But it also has a role in fostering sustainable consumption so either no waste is produced in the first place, or resources are kept in the EU for as long as possible.

EU chemicals legislation, such as REACH, is key in pushing industry in the right direction. Companies will need to rethink their conventional producer-consumer relationships, activities and the structure of their value chains in order to introduce circular business models and find their way in a truly sustainable economy.

The EU cannot act alone but requires the involvement of stakeholders at all levels including internationally.

The shift to a circular economy is already happening and the sooner businesses learn to adapt, the less likely this will impact them negatively. In the same way that REACH inspired non-EU countries to start implementing REACH-like regulations, Europe is aiming to use the leverage of its single market to set a global standard.

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*The views expressed in this article are those of the expert author and are not necessarily shared by Chemical Watch.*