

# REACH *Case story*

## Belgian REACH Helpdesk supports local companies



**Jean-Pierre Feytaerts, Belgian Helpdesk Correspondent**

European legislation on REACH requires each member state to establish a national helpdesk to assist companies in complying with the new measures.

In March 2005, Belgium established a

REACH helpdesk within the ministry responsible for the Federal Public Service, Economy, SMEs, independent Professions and Energy.

The unit is headed by Jean-Pierre Feytaerts. In addition to his team collaborators, he can also call on help from other officials in both the FPS and other departments if presented with particularly complex questions.

The helpdesk's role is purely factual and explanatory. It provides information on the obligations involved, but cannot give advice on how these should be met. Responsibility for implementation lies with companies themselves. "We provide the raw information but if something is important, we try to point it out, since the legislation is not always that easy to read. It is not our role to tell a company, for instance, that it has to write to its suppliers. Trade federations can do that," Mr Feytaerts explains.

### **Partnership**

The helpdesk has worked closely with the Federation of Enterprises in Belgium (FEB) and the chemical industry especially in its early days.

Between them, they developed an internet site providing factual information since May 2005.

<http://economie.fgov.be/reach.htm>

That partnership between government and industry also led to the creation of an inventory tool consisting of four Excel sheets and a manual which are freely available, to help companies itemise their substances and preparations and so determine their role in REACH and the possible impact of the legislation on them.

The helpdesk, whose information activities target SMEs in particular, has produced a 18-page brochure on REACH which can be provided either electronically or on paper. The unit does not organise events and seminars itself – that role is left to others such as the FEB – but it does participate in them and has done so on some 30 occasions.

## Questions

The helpdesk has to operate in several languages. Some 60% of the requests are submitted in Dutch and 20% in French. A further 20% are tabled in English, reflecting the fact that many companies based in Belgium are subsidiaries of multinationals which may wish to share the information throughout the group. The questions can be submitted by letter, email or an answer phone attached to a free phone number.

Many questions have come from traders – not surprising given that 13% of all European chemicals transit through the port of Antwerp. In particular, they have sought information on the responsibilities of “sole representative” and guidance on whether the definition of importer and imports in REACH is the same as in customs legislation. Many questions have also come from users of chemicals, such as companies producing paint, cosmetics or metals.

The helpdesk’s workload really began to pick up in early 2007. In January and February, it received as many information requests as it had during the two previous years. Currently, it is receiving about 60-70 requests a month, some raising just one question, others considerably more.

Each request is immediately acknowledged, and the unit looks, on average, to provide answers within a week. But as Mr Feyaerts explains, this can vary. “Sometimes, we are asked specific questions to which we can reply within two days. On other occasions, it can take two weeks.”

He also acknowledges that some questions can be hard to answer. “In Belgium, we decided to place the REACH unit in the industry and SME ministry, not in the department handling the chemical sector per se. Our background is more general economics, but we have colleagues we can turn to when we receive detailed questions on REACH and its relationship to existing legislation.”

He anticipates that the unit will continue to receive similar requests as previously during the pre-registration period until the end of the year. But from January, he predicts that they will be more along the lines: “I have made a mistake. How do I rectify it?”