

REACH *Case story*

European Chemicals Agency Helpdesk – For shared understanding of REACH Regulation



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The European Chemicals Agency (ECHA), under the REACH Regulation (Article 77 (2)), has an obligation to provide advice and assistance, from the date the legislation entered into force, to manufacturers and importers registering a substance. As a result, its helpdesk has operated since 1 June 2007.

The Helpdesk now has a dozen staff. It is responsible for providing advice on REACH; on REACH-IT, which provides online web functionality for companies to submit registration dossiers on chemicals; and on IUCLID 5 (International Uniform Chemical Information Database), software

for companies to store data on chemicals and to prepare their registration for ECHA. The Team can also call on the specialist knowledge of other ECHA employees and for the interpretation of the legislation consults the European Commission's Directorate-Generals for Enterprise and Industry and Environment.

In the beginning, the Agency operated a single web application form. Now, it has specific web forms for each of the three services of direct interest to companies (REACH, REACH-IT and IUCLID 5). This service is provided free of charge and may be used by manufacturers, importers, or downstream users from within the EU or by other stakeholders worldwide. Once completed, they are channelled to the relevant helpdesk official.

In addition, ECHA has created a pre-registration package which includes: a web site, promotional material, explanatory notes and web-based tutorials on how to comply with the legislation.

Joachim Ball, responsible for the ECHA Helpdesk, explains: "We provide advice and guide enquirers through the various sources of information so they can make their own determination of their obligations under REACH."

Questions

ECHA makes clear on its site that, whilst its role is to assist companies and importers, anyone in the EU seeking information should contact their national helpdesks in the 27 member states in the first instance.

Just under half of all enquiries to the ECHA helpdesk come from outside the European Union, especially China, Japan, North America and Russia (see box)

Source of questions

EU: 46%
EEA: 1%
Other European countries: 9%
Asia: 24%
North America: 10%
Other: 3%
Unknown: 7%

The Helpdesk aims to respond to enquiries within two weeks. At the moment the queries most frequently asked are concerned with: the import of chemical goods into the EU; registration; and the role of importers and only representatives. Increasingly, there is also a focus on pre-registration and the identification of substances – as one might expect with the opening of the pre-registration window.

ECHA keeps an up-to-date Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document on its web site, which has been discussed and agreed with the national REACH Helpdesks of the Member States. The FAQs have been updated three times in the past year and are an efficient way of communicating information to a wider audience. The document also provides links to guidance packages dealing with specific aspects of the legislation.

Currently, the number of requests is running at double the rate at the start of 2008. Since June last year, the Helpdesk has responded to some 4,400 enquiries, of these 1,900 concerned advice on REACH and 2,500 IUCLID 5.

Other responsibilities

The ECHA Helpdesk supports its national counterparts via a REACH network and an IT platform, and in practical terms may answer questions in English for Helpdesks that do not have the linguistic resources to do so.

The Network enables participants both to exchange information and examples of best practice. This is particularly useful when a National Helpdesk is replying to difficult requests or to similar questions that affect several members of the Network. A reply may be drafted and then the platform used to harmonise comments from the other participants.

These regular contacts help to ensure there is consistency and coherence in the replies the National Helpdesks give and so develop a common approach to providing advice to enquirers on the REACH legislation throughout the European Union.

In the future, as the pre-registration period comes to an end, ECHA expects that it will increasingly be handling questions relating to the next phase of the legislation: substance information exchange and the identification of substances.