

Level of consumer protection from carcinogenic substances is to be increased

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Joint information provided by the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU), the Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMELV), the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA), the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) and the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR)

Periodically consumer and environmental protection organisations find evidence of carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in various consumer products. A German initiative now aims to protect against the consumer health hazard of PAHs in consumer products EU-wide and to reduce the environmental impact of these substances.

In recent years, several independent German consumer protection organisations as well as federal and regional authorities have found high concentrations of PAHs in toys, plastic shoes and tool handles among others. Though a clear majority of products examined only had low or no concentrations, high PAH concentrations (partly at very high levels) were found in a significant number of samples. While PAH-free alternatives are available, these can be more expensive. Some PAHs were found to be carcinogenic in animal experiments. Due to their persistence, their tendency to accumulate in organisms and their toxicity, PAHs are also of environmental concern.

To date, neither mandatory EU limits nor a European Community strategy for reduced PAH contamination of consumer products are in place. Solely for the manufacture of tyres it is obligatory that extender oils containing certain carcinogenic PAHs at concentrations greater than 10 mg/kg shall not be used in tyre production.

However, consumer products and children's toys can also contain harmful PAHs. In order to protect consumers from harmful PAHs in an adequate and sufficient way, the Federal Ministry for the Environment and the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection have requested that the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA), the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) and the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) in close cooperation develop a restriction dossier in reference to the European chemicals legislation REACH. This dossier contains a comprehensive depiction of the extent of PAH contamination found in various consumer products, an assessment of potential consumer exposure as well as resulting health and environmental risks. It includes a proposal for EU-wide restrictions on the use and marketing of PAH-contaminated products.

In early June 2010, the Ministries presented the dossier to the European Commission and requested that the restrictions should be implemented in a simplified procedure (according to Article 68, Paragraph 2 of REACH Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006). This procedure applies to a substance on its own, in a preparation and in an article that is carcinogenic, mutagenic or toxic to reproduction (CMR substances) and which could be used by consumers. In contrast to the regular restriction procedure – a procedure that can take several years to complete – this facilitates a relatively rapid implementation. The provided dossier is a means by which Germany supports the European Commission which now has to decide on the rapid implementation into EU-wide legislation. BfR will shortly publish an assessment of PAHs in consumer products.