



POLICY

You'd like to clarify PFAS? Here is the place to start

The EU Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, has said she aims to simplify the REACH regulations and provide clarity on or PFAS. As a gesture of good will (soon it's Christmas, after all), ChemSec has decided to help out with these tasks and sent her two letters to sharpen her thinking. Here is the second.

Published on 04 Dec 2024



Dear Madame President,

We hope you found [our first letter](#) useful and thought-provoking. You did? Great! Because here is another one.

In your guidelines for the new European Commission, you said you want to [provide clarity on “forever chemicals”, or PFAS](#). Amen to that. As a good will-gesture, and to get your second term as president off to a flying start, we have decided to help you out by doing the vital legwork.

First, some necessary context. It is no exaggeration to say that Europe is facing a PFAS crisis. So far, 23,000 sites contaminated with PFAS [have been identified](#) in the EU. All of us, including you and your fellow commissioners, have [PFAS in our blood](#). Our waters have concentrations of PFAS that, in many cases, are [above safe levels](#). Due to the extreme persistence of these chemicals, their concentrations in nature and our bodies will continue to rise.

If we don't fix it now we will dig a hole that is too deep to climb out of, lined with litigation and human suffering.

This means there is an urgent need for a broad restriction for the use of all PFAS. Clarity on this matter therefore demands only one thing.

A restriction *is* clarity

The restriction proposal submitted by five member states last year aims at restricting the PFAS for all uses, unless no alternatives are available. The restriction – with justified, narrow, and time-limited derogations – will provide clarity to everyone. It provides business with much needed predictability in terms of regulation, and aligns with the aim of the industrial deal to support companies to comply.

To achieve this clarity, several things follow:



[If we don't fix it now, we will dig a hole too deep to climb out of](#)

1. It is important to follow the process

Formulating the restriction is a democratic process agreed upon by all Member States. It is important that we stick to this process, as outlined in the Chemical Strategy for Sustainability, since it is the basis for achieving the fairest and most effective restriction.

The PFAS crisis is pressing and widespread, so it is important to get it right, even if this requires time. The EU's scientific committees are evaluating all the available information to properly assess the potential for substitution. Where alternatives to PFAS are lacking, specified derogations will apply.

Featured news



POLICY

Simplifying REACH is... simple. Here's how to do it

[Read more](#)

2. The market transition is happening and needs support

Right now, there are available and viable alternatives to PFAS for many uses. In addition, the development of alternatives has taken off. The frontrunners who are phasing out PFAS, and the alternative providers supporting them, have already made huge progress towards a PFAS-free economy.

However, the market transition demands regulatory support. For the textile sector, for example, viable alternatives have been available for many years, but uptake has been too slow. A restriction rewards innovation, protects investments and supports R&D efforts. Blanket derogations for sectors or product categories, on the other hand, would damage the commitment and investments made by Europe's most innovative companies.

There's more where this came from.

Subscribe to our newsletter.

Subscribe

3. 'Consumer uses' is not enough

Focusing on sub-groups such as "consumer products" is obviously inadequate. Consumer products rely on industrial processes, and consumers are exposed to PFAS used via waste, emissions, decommissioning and as employees. A comprehensive restriction is essential, as outlined in the dossier of evidence underlying the proposal.

4. Emission control is not credible

The history of emission control is full of crises that could have been avoided if a more hazard based approach had been used instead. Specifically for PFAS, there are high-profile cases in which loss or lack of emission control has led to human health catastrophes. “Dark waters”, the Hollywood film about Parkersburg, West Virginia, is well known. But we could also mention Antwerp, Dordrecht, Ronneby, Trissino and Lyon as towns where citizens’ lives are being blighted by PFAS emissions.

And what happens when PFAS-containing products enter their end-of-life phase? Frankly, nobody really knows. Whether they end up being incinerated (or, more correctly, using heat to produce smaller PFAS) or leaching out from landfill, they won’t go away. A systemic approach is to solve the crisis, not move it to another stage in the product life cycle.

The PFAS crisis is pressing and widespread, it is important to get it right

The cost of inaction is high

The treatment of PFAS contamination – whether it is removing it from drinking water or soil, or treating human diseases that arise – requires vast amounts of resources. Moreover, you can’t clean rain water, and nobody is going to clean human blood. Estimates of the societal costs range from a couple of trillion euros (enough money to buy 2,500 jumbo jets) to over \$100 trillion (equal to global GDP).

The longer the Commission fails to solve the crisis, the greater the cost of cleaning up will be. What is the point of mopping the floor before you have turned off the tap?

Madame President, to clarify PFAS you need to make sure that the ongoing restriction process is allowed to proceed as planned to achieve a comprehensive regulation. This will fulfil the aims of the CSS, ensure predictability for industry, secure investments and bolster European competitiveness.

This is what we in Sweden would call a *smorgasbord* of great achievements!

Wishing you all the very best for your second presidency,

ChemSec

* Read the first of these two letters: *“Simplifying REACH is... simple. Here’s how to do it“*

Related news

PEER

EUROPEAN
COMMISSION
TOXIC
SUBSTANCES
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL
FOR ENVIRONMENT
'SITING'
CUTTING
TOXIC
MATERIAL
POLICY
EU

see all



An independent non-profit organisation that advocates substitution of toxic chemicals to safer alternatives.