

Environmental and social responsibility for the 21st Century

Voluntary Risk Assessment on Lead

Getting the facts, exposing the fiction

Throughout the world, legislation is under constant review to ensure that both man and the environment are adequately protected from lead's hazardous properties. Towards the end of the 1990s it became clear that, despite the huge body of information available on lead, some data gaps still existed. As a result industry volunteered to conduct a comprehensive assessment of lead risks in the European Union (EU).

In the EU at the time, an official procedure already existed for governments to conduct such assessments. However no assessment had ever been conducted on lead. The lead industry was the first industry to volunteer to perform such an assessment according to this procedure. As a result the industry spent many years working with the European Commission and EU governments to agree on a process by which industry could carry out a risk assessment in an open and transparent way, and ultimately for the assessment to be reviewed by EU governments.

To avoid any accusation of bias, independent consultants were appointed to conduct the assessment and leading international experts in the field of lead were appointed to two independent scientific review panels which periodically reviewed the work output. Both the consultants and the review panel members were approved by the European Commission and a Reviewing Country.

The Netherlands government agreed to participate as the Reviewing Country to monitor progress. The risk assessment is extremely comprehensive, covering lead metal and the major lead compounds throughout the life cycle (i.e. from production through to use, recycling and, where recycling is not possible, disposal).

The process of conducting the risk assessment took four years, after which draft reports on environment, health and waste were submitted to the European Chemicals Bureau in 2005. Since then the reports have been extensively reviewed by EU government and will also be reviewed by the EU's independent Scientific Committee on Health and Environmental Risks (SCHER).

The project is already providing valuable information on how risks from lead can be effectively managed, for example in the case of worker health, and industry is committed to implementing these measures. The report is also helping to identify areas where further research is needed and again industry is committed to delivering this.

The €4 million cost of the risk assessment has been met in its entirety by the lead industry. The work has helped the industry improve its knowledge of the impact of lead on health and the environment. The information has also been useful to regulators of national and local issues.

