Swiftly Changing Landscapes for European Chemicals Regulation

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Through its membership in the High-Level Round Table (HLRT) for the implementation of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability (CSS) under the EU Green Deal, and with the support of a sounding board, SETAC Europe tracks the landscape on chemicals regulations closely. The HLRT convened on 1 February to discuss the broad implementation of the CSS and specifically transition pathways for industry, including investment matters. Interesting opportunities have arisen for Society members to support these swift transitions with their scientific expertise.

Background

One of the ambitions of the Green Deal in Europe is to achieve a toxic-free and zero-pollution future. In order to reach this ambitious goal, the EU Commission developed the CSS. A key element of the strategy is the development of transition pathways to facilitate the evolution of major European industries. The first transition pathway, launched recently, is for the chemical sector in Europe and for those exporting to the European market. The transition will require significant changes to the sector, including decarbonization of feedstocks and energy supply, as well as sustainability assessment of the whole life cycle of chemicals and a revision of REACH. As one example, the Safe and Sustainable by Design (SSbD) framework will need to be further developed to adequately address these needs.

Co-developments on a Transition Pathway

The transition pathway will need to be co-developed by all stakeholders in the chemicals sector, including members of SETAC Europe as leading scientific experts on environmental chemistry and safety. The co-development must involve scientists, as organized in SETAC under the pertinent umbrella of Environmental Quality through Science®, who can bring scientific expertise from its tripartite membership to the table. For this reason, SETAC Europe's sounding board for the HLRT has organized sessions and workshops, shared questionnaires with its membership, and asked for specific input from Interest Groups, all to gauge the contributions that we can provide to the co-development process. These activities aim to promote the scientific soundness and robustness of the entire process of transition, e.g., by providing inputs into the methodology character and determining which metrics and indicators need to be co-developed. This is an ongoing effort and the HLRT representative, supported by the sounding board, will continue to share information and invite the membership to engage in the co-development process, thus enabling a meaningful contribution to the sustainable development of chemicals. The next opportunity for a face-to-face engagement will be at the special session on "Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability," which will take place on 1 May during the SETAC Europe 33rd Annual Meeting in Dublin, Ireland.

Some Remarkable Matters

The 4th HLRT meeting, held on 1 February at the EU Commission in Brussels, illustrated some challenges along the co-development pathway. It was attended by Hans Sanderson, Aarhus University and HLRT sounding board member, and Bart Bosveld, SETAC Europe Executive Director. Importantly, they observed that the transition involves not only the larger companies but also thousands of small- and medium enterprises that make up the chemical industry in Europe. This marks the need to make scientific results available and easily accessible by developing valid, operational tools to support a sustainable transition. To sketch a basic example, it is useful for those companies to be aware of potential hazard problems by, for example, providing tick-mark lists for them to be able to recognize what chemicals they handle, what regulations are in place and why, and what they can do about problems. The need for such tools is further underscored from an investment point of view in the Sustainable Finance Taxonomy. The Green Deal also indicates a need to derive diverse footprints (e.g., carbon, water, chemical) so that institutional investors can take transparent, risk-based decisions that yield revenue, thereby contributing to financial stability and avoiding generation of “stranded assets.” The need to derive a diversity of footprints is highly relevant for SETAC, with cornerstone activities in chemical safety, environmental quality and life cycle assessments. In the changed Green Deal landscape, there is latitude to co-develop science across the board with multiple different end users.

Outlook

The HLRT representative and sounding board will remain active and will continue to engage with the membership to undertake consultation and feedback on the process. From these discussions, it has become clear that the chemical landscape is changing swiftly, providing latitude and urging forward science to practice. The “mindset” for a successful co-development to a safe(r) and more sustainable chemical economy encompasses good science that fits the practical needs of the end users.

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