

Leading Electronics companies and Environmental organisations urge EU to restrict more hazardous substances in electronic products in 2015 to avoid more global dioxin formation

(Strasbourg – 19 May 2010) EU legislators are now in the process of deciding future restrictions on hazardous substances in electronics through the EU Restrictions on Hazardous Substances (RoHS) directive.ⁱ An alliance consisting of Acer, Dell, Hewlett-Packard and Sony Ericsson, together with public interest organisation ChemSec, Clean Production Action and the European Environmental Bureau, call on EU legislators to ban the use of all brominated flame retardants (BFR) and polyvinyl chloride (PVC) in electronics put on the market from end of 2015 onwards.

The current RoHS Directive restricts some heavy metals and two types of BFR. The alliance is calling for restrictions on all brominated substances as well as PVC. The European Parliament Environment Committee will vote on the RoHS proposal on 3 June. The European Parliament will consider the directive in plenary in July 2010.

“The supply chain can indeed provide safer substitutes for these hazardous substances,” adds ChemSec Senior Policy Advisor Nardono Nimpuno. “Our recent research report testifies to the fact that alternatives are available, cost effective and suppliers are ready to scale up their production of these alternative materials.”ⁱⁱ

Alexandra McPherson, Managing Partner at Clean Production Action, “Strong substance restrictions in RoHS will drive the global market place in the electronic sector towards substances and materials that are safer for human health and the environment. Companies committed to innovation and green chemistry have paid a premium for safer products, we now need RoHS to level the playing field.”

This alliance of business and NGOs is also calling on the EU to recognize the ability of these substances to generate highly hazardous dioxins and other substances of concern when these substances are incinerated at end of life or more importantly, burned in substandard treatment sites outside the EU. The export of e-waste is banned under EU law but much e-waste makes its way to Asia, Africa and Latin America under the guise of recycling.

The use of PVC and brominated flame retardants in electronics is highly problematic from both an environmental and a human health perspective. When incinerated, they have the potential to transform into some of the most toxic chemicals ever made by humans, dioxins and furans. Dioxins and furans are global pollutants that are highly persistent in the environment and can cause cancer, birth defects and neurological damage. Chlorinated dioxins are generated from the burning of PVC plastic and have been classified as one of the top global pollutants by the International Stockholm Convention. Brominated flame retardants also have the potential to generate dioxins in substandard treatment and their presence in products has been shown to present risks to workers in shredding facilities. Both pathways have been documented recently by researchers from UMEA University in a report compiled for the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (draft report March 2010ⁱⁱⁱ).

A recent research report released by ChemSec demonstrates that most applications of PVC and BFRs have been removed from over 500 product models on the market today, including mobile phones, computers, washing machines, coffee machines and TVs. Products from 28 companies, among them Acer, Apple, Dell, HP, Nokia, Philips, Samsung and Sony Ericsson, are listed in the report.

“The objective of the RoHS directive is to protect human health and the environment and to contribute to environmentally sound recovery and disposal of electrical and electronic equipment”, explains Christian Schaible of the European Environmental Bureau, EEB. “EU lawmakers should accordingly take this opportunity to eliminate these hazardous substances that are having a negative impact on recycling and the conservation of resources”.

Perspectives from the IT industry:

- “The transition away from environmentally sensitive substances, such as brominated flame retardants and PVC is well under way at Acer. However we do not have the leverage to move the entire supply-chain on our own. Legislators can help in this process”, explains Acer. “By introducing restrictions, and thereby ensuring that the entire supply-chain is on board, costs are kept down and availability of safer alternative material is promoted.”
- “Dell supports including BFRs and PVC among the substances restricted by RoHS, as well as a full ban on these substances in 2015,” said Mark Newton, Dell’s director of sustainability. “Given the ongoing discussions in the EU Institutions on the RoHS recast, we hope EU decision makers revise RoHS to prohibit the use of PVC and BFRs in electrical and electronic equipment.”
- “Hewlett Packard is working with suppliers globally to remove these chemicals from personal computing product lines”, said Ray Moskaluk at Hewlett Packard. “We know safer substitutes exist through our scientific assessment of alternatives. We support these restrictions in a revised RoHS directive.”
- Sony Ericsson is committed to a complete phase-out of halogenated organic substances from its products, and at the current time has phased out almost all brominated flame retardants (BFR),” said Daniel Paska, Environmental Expert at Sony Ericsson. “We believe the electronics industry has a responsibility to move proactively to find substitutes to replace BFR and PVC and are therefore calling on EU legislators to show leadership on this issue by voting to tighten the RoHS directive.”

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ⁱ The EU RoHS Directive, restricting the use of hazardous substances in electronic and electrical equipment, is currently under review. Since 2006 RoHS restricts the use of two groups of brominated flame retardants and four heavy metals, among them lead and mercury.

ⁱⁱ Greening Consumer Electronics report 2009 www.chemsec.org/rohs/greening-consumer-electronics

ⁱⁱⁱ Health hazards and environmental impacts associated with recycling and disposal of electronic waste.