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## **REACH: Achievements and Challenges**

*Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Helsinki Chemicals Forum 2009

**Helsinki, 28 May 2009**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here in Finland and to speak at this first Helsinki Chemicals Forum. This important new initiative is being launched in this city, which is already home to the European Chemicals Agency, ECHA. I am confident that this annual forum will further add to Helsinki's reputation as a world centre for chemical knowledge and expertise.

I strongly support the Forum's ambition to provide a global platform to debate and discuss chemicals and I am pleased to see representatives here today from industry, academia, consumer organisations, authorities and civil society.

The safe production, use and management of chemicals is something we all share an interest in, not just because it is our job, but because ultimately, we are all consumers.

Chemicals are part of our daily lives. They are in us, on us and all around us. From the production of the food we eat, to health, personal care and household products, we come into contact with chemicals every day. While many of them contribute to our comfort and well-being, some can seriously damage our health or our environment.

Today, I would like to highlight what the EU has achieved in recent years in the field of chemicals legislation, and look at some of the challenges ahead. I will also touch upon some encouraging international developments that have taken place in recent weeks, which will reduce the health risks from dangerous chemicals for millions of people worldwide.

Safeguarding the environment and improving health and safety have been the guiding principles behind EU chemicals legislation since its beginning more than 40 years ago. The adoption and implementation of the REACH Regulation marked the start of a new process in the chemicals legislation. This is a great achievement for the EU, which should also help us influence what is going on worldwide.

Over the past 10 years we have forged a truly revolutionary chemicals policy. With the adoption of REACH at the end of 2006, the EU completed a fundamental reform of its chemicals legislation. It is certainly one of the most important pieces of law passed during the current Commission's mandate and an achievement I am personally proud of.

REACH was the answer to the need to close the serious knowledge gap that existed under the previous legislation. We had very little information about more than 100,000 chemical substances in use. Most of these had never been tested. The "burden of proof" to ensure that chemicals are safe previously fell on the authorities. REACH now places this responsibility on industry.

And the reason is simple: industry is best placed to know and ensure that the chemicals it manufactures are safe for human health and the environment. This is notably the purpose of the REACH registration procedure.

The chemical industry is a highly specialised one, and the majority of companies in the EU have a great deal of knowledge about their chemicals and do observe safety rules. However, the emphasis under REACH is on creating a central data base, and on sharing and registering all existing and new knowledge for everybody's benefit.

REACH is now operational, but because its processes are new, there are three immediate operational challenges for industry and authorities.

The first challenge is the enormous amount of data to be gathered and processed. Industry responded tremendously last year in the pre-registration phase. Some 65,000 companies registered 143,000 substances by the December 1 deadline.

We are now in the second phase and companies manufacturing the same substance must share the information they have with fellow producers. In the light of the high number of pre-registrations received, this has turned out to be a challenge for all participants, be they small specialised companies or large multinational producers. However, I am pleased to see how industry, ECHA and the Commission have responded to the difficulties that were signalled. It is industry that is driving and guiding this process and a number of support systems have been established. I commend industry's engagement and dedication to making this important part of the REACH process work.

Informing customers and competitors of existing and new information about the properties of the chemicals, their use and handling is new and demanding. But this is rewarding since it is due to play a critical role in ensuring that chemicals are handled as safely as possible.

The first registration deadline – November 2010 – is just around the corner. These are serious challenges, but we count on industry's expertise, networks, and innovative spirit to face them and to find solutions to comply with the regulation.

The second challenge is making the REACH authorisation procedure work. The objective is to substitute the most dangerous chemicals. A substance included in the authorisation list can only be used if it is authorised for a specific use. The procedure includes a candidate list of dangerous chemicals, known as "substances of very high concern" which should, over time, be substituted by less dangerous ones.

The challenge is two-fold.

Firstly the procedure contains many steps, allowing for a transparent and inclusive consultation process. Scientific evidence shows that there are presently around 1,000 substances that qualify as "substances of very high concern". However, the current candidate list contains only 15 substances. How quickly to go forward and how many substances to include in the authorisation system, remains a matter of much debate and concerns, which I fully understand

It is clear to me that we have to be guided by existing scientific knowledge about the risks involved, while of course taking due account of practicability and workability of the system. But the system needs to be tailored to our needs and not the opposite. This of course work in progress but this shall remain our objective. Another challenge related to substitution is what will replace these substances. In some cases this may mean using other chemicals, but in other cases the solution may involve new production processes or even completely different products or methods.

The third challenge is the current economic climate which means that many companies need to tighten their purse-strings. Some have called for REACH implementation to be suspended to avoid having to devote resources to what they perceive as essentially a bureaucratic procedure.

This would not be the right way forward. There is no doubt that these are difficult economic times, but we must consider the current economic downturn as an opportunity and not as an obstacle.

REACH will help promote innovation and competitiveness, another topic that will be discussed here in more detail today.

If we apply environmental and health principles cleverly, innovation will follow naturally. And competitiveness will increase. The two go hand in hand. Consumer confidence will also increase because the public will know that chemicals are being used carefully and responsibly.

Improved communication through information gathering will lead to new business contacts, more efficient work methods and more innovative products, resulting in new market opportunities.

Above all, REACH will lead to better levels of safety, fewer accidents and sick days, higher productivity, and greater competitiveness at a global level.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have come a long way but beyond the immediate challenges there are other issues that we need to consider in the longer term.

While REACH considers the effects of single substances, the fact is that we are most commonly exposed to a cocktail of many different substances. This is an area in which important gaps remain in terms of knowledge and assessment. These gaps need to be closed in the coming years.

The challenge posed by endocrine disruptors is known. These chemicals interfere with the production of hormones responsible for the development of the brain and reproductive organs, as well as other bodily functions. Specific criteria and test methods need to be developed to determine the endocrine disrupting properties of chemicals.

Nanotechnology promises huge benefits for the environment, energy and medicine but because of their small size and their specific properties, these innovative materials can have unpredictable effects. To properly assess their safety, we will need to know a lot more about what is on the market and how these materials function.

Clearly, further work needs to be done to consider whether specific legislation is required to address the risks that may result from the use of nanotechnologies. This is one of our short term tasks. So as you can see, there is still much work to be done and our efforts on all sides need to be further sustained and even strengthened in the light of the challenges that we face and the legitimate expectations of our citizens.

I welcome the efforts being made by industry in the EU to comply with REACH, and I encourage industry worldwide to continue to work to improve its environmental record.

I welcome the developments in countries such as the United States, China and Japan, that have observed the REACH implementation in the EU closely, and that are in the process of reviewing their chemicals legislation at the moment.

Many others are working to bring their legislation in line with the Globally Harmonised System for Classification and Labelling, a step the EU completed in January this year. Given the extensive global trade in chemicals, consistent and appropriate information on chemicals is needed to control chemical exposure and protect people and the environment worldwide.

We know that change does not happen overnight but more recent developments at international level show us that hard work does pay off. The European Commission strongly welcomes the decision to add nine dangerous chemicals to the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.

This is a significant achievement and something the EU has been working towards for many years. These are highly toxic chemicals that can lead to cancer, birth defects and immune and reproductive system dysfunctions. POPs are already heavily restricted in the EU because of the risks they pose to health and the environment. This decision means that millions of people worldwide will receive greater health protection.

There were also important developments at the second International Conference on Chemicals Management, which also met earlier this month in Geneva to evaluate the progress made towards achieving sound chemicals management by 2020. This political commitment was agreed in February 2006 by 140 countries.

The conference highlighted four emerging issues as the focus for future work: nanotechnologies, electronic waste, chemicals in everyday products and lead in paint. You can count on the Commission to actively contribute to further work on these four issues.

The Commission also supports the UN's call for more resources to fully implement the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM). The European Union is actively implementing SAICM through its policies and legislation, while also supporting and working with other countries to meet the 2020 goal.

Sound chemicals management is essential to the sustainable development of all societies. Each country is responsible for ensuring the highest level of protection for its citizens and the environment and the European Union is committed to playing its part in achieving chemical safety for citizens and the environment worldwide.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to close by stressing that everybody here has an important role to play in making chemicals safer. Besides being public servants, scientists, industry representatives or academics, we are all citizens and consumers.

We can all make an important contribution to better chemicals management. We can ask critical questions. We can choose not to buy products that contain toxic chemicals. And ultimately, we can contribute to the enforcement of legislation.

I am looking forward with great interest to the coming years, to a time when REACH is fully implemented and new decisions on chemicals are made in other countries.

And I am also looking forward to seeing the concrete results of the Helsinki Chemicals Forum, which has a crucial role to play in helping to deliver new approaches to deal with the environmental challenges facing us. The more knowledge we have, the closer we will come to our goal of living in a world in which chemicals are produced, used and managed safely.

Thank you for your attention. I wish you a successful meeting.