EU policy on endocrine disruptors

Endocrine disruptors (EDs) are substances that disturb the functioning of hormones, and are associated with various human health problems, including reduced fertility and reproductive abnormalities. EDs can act at very low doses and are especially dangerous during pregnancy and in infancy. Despite intensive research efforts, there are still major gaps in understanding of endocrine disruption phenomena.

The European Parliament's Environment Committee has adopted a report (rapporteur Åsa Westlund, S&D, Sweden) calling for a reduction in human exposure to EDs, assessment and updating of relevant EU legislation, and greater emphasis on the precautionary principle in the ongoing review of the EU's strategy on EDs.

Community strategy

The European Commission is in the process of reviewing the Community strategy on endocrine disruptors, which it plans to complete in the second quarter of 2013.

Actions under the 1999 Community strategy (COM(1999) 706) include the establishment of a list of 'priority substances', harmonisation of new testing methods, research and information exchange, and updating of legislation.

The fourth implementation report on the Strategy (SEC(2011) 1001) notes that a priority list of substances has been established. Research on endocrine disruptors is carried out at the Commission's Joint Research Centre and in projects supported through the research framework programmes. An OECD expert group works on developing internationally accepted criteria and tests for identifying EDs.

The state-of-the-art assessment of endocrine disruptors, produced for the European Commission at the end of 2011, advocates placing EDs in a separate regulatory category and proposes weight-of-evidence assessment procedures.

In June 2012, the Commission organised a conference on science and policy of EDs, and a European Parliament workshop on EDs' health impacts was held in September 2012.

At the Commission's request, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is preparing a scientific opinion on the risks of EDs in the food chain, to be published in March 2013.

An initial discussion paper prepared by DG Environment in November 2012 proposes definitions for endocrine disruptors and four regulatory categories (known, presumed, suspected and potential ED) based on the strength of evidence for their effects on hormone systems.

EU legislation

Several pieces of EU legislation concerning endocrine disruptors will require updating after uniform criteria and testing methods have been established.

The REACH Regulation ((EC) No 1907/2006), for registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals) provides for the regulation of EDs as substances of 'equivalent concern', on a case by case basis. The Commission must review the REACH Regulation's approach to endocrine disruptors by June 2013.

The Plant Protection Product Regulation, ((EC) No 1107/2009) and the Biocides Regulation ((EU) No 528/2012) prohibit products with endocrine-disrupting properties and require the Commission to specify scientific criteria for the determination of endocrine-disrupting properties by the end of 2013.

Other EU legislation related to EDs includes the Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC), Regulation (EC) 1272/2008 on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixtures, the Toy Safety Directive (2009/48/EC) and Regulation (EC) 1223/2009 on cosmetic products.

European Commission Directive 2011/8/EU prohibits the production and sale of baby bottles containing bisphenol A (BPA), an endocrine disrupting chemical.

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