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## ENVIRONMENT-EU: Civil Society Demands a Role in Monitoring Chemical Substances

**Alicia Fraerman**

**MADRID, Nov 11 (IPS) - Non-governmental organisations and trade unions are demanding the right to participate in the control of the manufacture and sale of chemical substances in the European Union alongside producers, government authorities and health experts.**

During a plenary session at its headquarters in Strasbourg beginning next Tuesday, the European Parliament will debate the proposed new European Union (EU) chemicals legislation known as REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals).

If REACH is adopted, chemical manufacturers will be required to register the properties of some 30,000 substances in a central EU database, as a means of protecting people from the adverse health effects of a wide range of products, from paint and detergents to cars and computers.

One of the most controversial aspects of the legislation is the responsibility it places on industry. While civil society and trade union groups support this initiative, they are also calling for the right to participate in the process, said Joaquín Nieto, the occupational health and environment secretary of the Confederation of Workers' Commissions, one of Spain's two largest trade union federations.

This demand of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions was endorsed on Friday by the hundreds of health professionals who signed a declaration stating their support of REACH, presented at a press conference by Juan Antonio Ortega García, coordinator of the Environmental Health Committee of the Spanish Paediatric Association.

Ortega García was accompanied at the presentation by Nieto, Spanish Green Party Eurodeputy David Hammerstein, and Vicente Moreno, coordinator of the chemicals campaign for the NGO Ecologists in Action.

Also in attendance to show their support were representatives of Greenpeace, WWF /ADENA, and Friends of the Earth.

Cándido Méndez, secretary-general of Spain's General Union of Workers (UGT) and president of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), told IPS that these organisations give their full backing to the declaration.

In an interview with IPS, Nieto stressed the importance of the fact that compliance with the legislation falls first and foremost to manufacturers, "who must provide the necessary information before launching products on the market by submitting reports to the relevant authorities."

At the same time, however, NGOs and unions are pushing for the establishment of a European agency to coordinate the oversight process in which both of these sectors are represented, he said.

Hammerstein commented to IPS that "Europe has a historic opportunity to defend the lives of millions of people with pioneering preventive health care legislation."

Nevertheless, in order to achieve this goal, "we have to join forces and fight back against the industry pressure groups, which place profits before public health," he said.

"The European chemical industry is all-powerful and manufacturers are pressuring to keep REACH from making it through Parliament," remarked Hammerstein. As a result, "this is one of the toughest battles we are currently waging."

German manufacturers in particular are fighting the proposed legislation "tooth and nail," with the support of their government, he added, commenting that this poses a significant threat to the initiative, given Germany's influence in the EU and the fact that it is home to the continent's largest chemical industry.

In fact, while the European Parliament will be voting on REACH next Thursday as planned, the definitive EU member nation vote on the legislation scheduled for the end of this month was postponed on Friday as a result of German pressure.

For his part, Professor Nicolás Olea of the University of Granada highlighted the need for tests to determine the potentially harmful effects of any chemical substance before it is put on the market, because often the toxicity of a product does not become evident until it has already been in use for several years.

Olea explained that there are chemical compounds that pollute the environment and then enter human tissue, where they provoke hormonal imbalances that can lead to illnesses that are not detected until a certain amount of time has elapsed, in both the individuals and sometimes even

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their children. As a result, he maintains that studies should be carried out over the long term and across generations.

The declaration presented on Friday points to the lack of toxicological information on currently unregulated substances that are found in workplaces and in a wide range of consumer goods.

It stresses that because the burden of proof currently lies with government authorities, they must be able to provide evidence of harmful effects before adopting preventive measures, which can often take years.

The declaration also emphasises that there are chemical substances proven to have toxic properties, including carcinogenic effects, that nevertheless remain in use, while there are no regulations that address the threat posed by chemical substances throughout their full life cycle.

The signatories consequently called for the legislation to require the registration and comprehensive testing of all substances already on the market, and especially those produced in quantities greater than one ton a year.

They also urged the adoption of a provision that would demand the elimination of extremely dangerous substances for which safer alternatives are available, as well as a validation mechanism to guarantee that sufficient information is provided for all phases of production.

The NGOs and trade unions want a guarantee of transparency in decision-making, access to information for all interested parties, and a continued flow of information throughout the life cycle of the substances and the products made with them.

They additionally called for all imported products containing chemical substances to be subject to the same information requirements as those produced in the European Union. (END/2005)

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