

The **ABCs** of REACH

The REACH regulation is the main EU chemicals safety law. It was introduced in 2006 to better protect people, wildlife, and the environment from harmful chemicals, while enhancing competitiveness and innovation. REACH is not the first EU chemicals law - there have been several laws starting from 1967.

But we are facing a chemical pollution challenge and REACH is not up to the task.

Pollution is the third great planetary crisis, alongside climate change and biodiversity loss [1]. Study after study shows that toxic chemicals are found all over the world and in our bodies [2]. These substances have been linked to cancers [3][4], a reduction in children's IQ [5] and can drive infertility [6][7].

After 15 years of implementation, a revision is underway. We have an opportunity to fix REACH.

What's gone wrong?

Toxic pollution keeps increasing

It is literally raining the toxic forever chemicals PFAS [8]. Many studies have found harmful chemicals in our bodies – in blood, umbilical cords and placentas [9], meaning that newborns start life already contaminated. Chemical pollution threatens the fertility of wildlife, such as orcas [10].

Everyday products contain toxic chemicals

We are exposed to toxic chemicals in the products we use every day [11] - including in body lotions applied to our skin, in the sofa we sit on, and in the packaging we wrap our sandwiches in. Studies have found the forever chemicals PFAS in countless products - from dental floss to raincoats.

Action is taken at a snail's pace

Regulatory action is very slow. It takes on average six years to restrict the use of a single harmful substance [12].

A shocking lack of safety information

70% of registration dossiers don't adequately inform on whether the chemical substances are harmful and where they are being used [13]. This is not lawful, but has little repercussions, and the lack of information prevents authorities from taking protective action.

REACH stands in the way of progressive companies

Some businesses innovate away from harmful chemicals before action is taken under REACH. But this ambition is not rewarded: they face high investment costs and unfair competition from the other companies that complacently wait or even block progress.

The cross-border Forever Pollution Project [14] uncovered the shocking level of contamination with the toxic and long-lasting chemicals PFAS, called forever chemicals. There are 19,000 confirmed hotspots all over Europe, but this is an underestimate.

This toxic legacy has been built while REACH has been in force.

What can be done?

REACH needs to be improved. The REACH reform was promised for 2022, but has been politically delayed in the Commission.

Every month of delay adds to the toxic chemicals in our environment and in our bodies.

A revised REACH will better protect our health and environment, and keep up with the companies that want to innovate and are asking for certainty.

The main REACH procedures

It's all in the name:

The **R**egistration, **E**valuation, **A**uthorisation and restriction of **C**hemicals

Registration: All chemical substances that are produced or put on the market in the EU above a certain tonnage must be registered. Companies must collect information on the properties, uses, hazards and potential risks of substances, and submit it to the European Chemicals Agency in a registration dossier.

Evaluation: There are two types of evaluations - one is of the registration dossier (also called a compliance check), the other is of the chemical substance itself, done in order to clarify if it poses a risk to human health or the environment.

Authorisation: Substances of very high concern, abbreviated as SVHCs, can be added to the authorisation list. Once added to this list, companies need to apply for authorisations in order to continue the production and use of those substances. Imports are not covered by this provision.

Restriction: Restrictions limit or ban the production, placing on the market (including imports) or the use of chemical substances. There are two types of restrictions, which we can classify as normal and fast-track. The fast-track restriction only applies to consumer uses.

These processes are primarily managed by the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA).

[1] UNEP, 2021. [For people and planet: the UNEP strategy for 2022–2025](#).

[2] European Human Biomonitoring Initiative, 2022. [HBM4EU newspaper](#).

[3] Breast Cancer UK, 2022. [BCUK Briefing: Bisphenols and Breast Cancer](#).

[4] European Environment Agency, 2019. [Emerging chemical risks in Europe - 'PFAS'](#).

[5] CHEM Trust, 2017. [No Brainer: The impact of chemicals on children's brain development: a cause for concern and a need for action](#).

[6] Levine et al, 2017. [Temporal trends in sperm count: a systematic review and meta-regression analysis](#). *Human Reproduction Update*.

[7] Kortenkamp et al, 2022. [Combined exposures to bisphenols, polychlorinated dioxins, paracetamol, and phthalates as drivers of deteriorating semen quality](#). *Environment International*.

[8] Persson et al, 2022. [Outside the Safe Operating Space of the Planetary Boundary for Novel Entities](#). *Environmental Science & Technology*.

[9] Environmental Working Group, 2022. [Pregnant with PFAS: The threat of 'forever chemicals' in cord blood](#).

[10] Desforges et al, 2018. [Predicting global killer whale population collapse from PCB pollution](#). *Science*.

[11] CHEM Trust, 2022. [Chemical Cocktails: The neglected threat of toxic mixtures and how to fix it](#).

[12] EEB, 2022. [The Need for Speed: Why it takes the EU a decade to control harmful chemicals and how to secure more rapid protections](#).

[13] European Environment Agency, 2019. [The European environment - state and outlook 2020: Knowledge for transition to a sustainable Europe, Chapter 10: Chemical pollution](#)

[14] [The Forever Pollution Project: Journalists tracking PFAS across Europe, 2023](#).

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