Possible pitfalls for processors

At the end of October 2003, the European Commission presented a proposal for updating chemicals legislation.

The new legislation is intended to replace over 40 directives and regulations currently in force. Named REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorization of Chemicals) for short, this legislation would shift onto the chemicals industry a very great responsibility for managing health and environmental risks and for communicating safety data.

At the heart of the system would be a central database. Every enterprise producing or importing more than one ton a year of a particular chemical would have to be registered and provide information on the properties and uses of this substance and precautions for its employment. A new European Chemicals Agency would receive the registration dossiers and would be responsible for managing the database.

Although SolVin is not directly concerned, as PVC and the other polymers are not part of REACH, it is nonetheless following this dossier very closely via the European Chemical Industry Council (Cefic). "*Even if improvements in the basic text which reduce the administrative and financial burdens on the companies have already been obtained, there is still a lot of imprecise wording that could prove very damaging for processors,*" SolVin PVC Promotion Manager Helmuth Leitner explains. "*For example, the lack of adequate safeguards for the confidentiality of the data to be recorded, with the potential risk of leaks of manufacturing secrets. A second example: producers who will be required to measure the effects (toxicity tests etc.) of the chemicals of which they produce more than one ton a year will be tempted to avoid these costs by halting production of less profitable substances. And what of the processors deprived in this way of vital substances?*"

REACH has now to be adopted by the European Council and Parliament, which will take a certain time. Until then, the professional associations will be doing everything possible to get their arguments heard... ■

Good news!

The European Chemicals Bureau's final report on plasticizers di-"isodecyl" phthalate (DIDP) and di-"isononyl" phthalate (DINP) concludes that there is no need to continue the risk studies on these products. The latest studies, showing that the production and use of these products are without danger to health or the environment, put an end to the interminable discussions that weighed heavy on the future of the plasticized PVC applications in question (floor coverings, imitation leather etc.).

For the report summaries, go to http://ecb.jrc.it/QSAR/, and then click successively on What's new, Risk Assessment Summary Vol 40 (January 2004), and finally on di-"isodecyl" phthalate and di-"isononyl" phthalate.

New talking partner

Xavier van Kesteren, SolVin PVC Promotion Belgium, also chairs the independent "PVC-INFO" association (www.pvcinfo.be). Created in 2002, this is the Belgian PVC industry's voice to government, the press and the PVC world.

Xavier van Kesteren has taken over responsibility at SolVin for promoting PVC in Belgium, succeeding Renaud Louwagie who has taken well-earned retirement. After 17 years in Solvay's Chemicals Sector, working in technical customer assistance and market development, Xavier was looking for new horizons. His wishes have been heard! "*I will of course pursue Renaud's work*", he says. "*I will continue, for example, to attach major importance to contacts with school and university teachers. I am also available to SolVin's partners to explain PVC's strengths and its contribution to sustainable development, to help them answer questions from their own customers.*"

Since arriving, Xavier has also launched the "SolVin Envi Post" in the form of short messages on PVC-related events e-mailed to SolVin's Benelux contacts.

Who are they?

Autumn 2003 in Panama's San Lorenzo natural reserve. The SolVin Pretzel is taking part in a major study of insects living in the tropical rain forest.

Scientists estimate that insects represent 80% of terrestrial species, but that most of these little creatures have never yet been collected or described. *"And so what? Apart from satisfying entomologists' curiosity, what use is there in knowing them?"* you may well ask. Believe it or not, insects play a very important role in ecosystems, in particular by providing the pollination necessary for one third of the world's harvests – making them worth an estimated 117 billion dollars a year[1] ! They also have a less attractive side, as the carriers of infectious diseases which cause sickness or even kill 200 million people every year[2]. Listing and studying them is therefore interesting for more than one reason.

Last September-October, the SolVin Pretzel (a net stretched over an inflatable PVC structure) helped scientists get to know the maximum possible number of insects living in the Panama tropical rain forest. Taking part in the IBISCA 2003 mission, financed mainly by SolVin/Solvay and by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) which maintains a permanent study centre in this forest, a team of 45, including some 30 eminent entomologists carried out a study of the vertical layering of the insects (which ones living at what height?) and to compare the biodiversity of insects living at the forest floor with that of those in the forest canopy (treetops).

This work calls for special technical resources given the height of the trees and it is here that the SolVin Pretzel came into its own: Transported by a Panamanian army helicopter and placed on top of the trees, it provided researchers with a platform from which to work on the forest canopy.

Over a six-week period, scientists collected thousands of insects at 8 different sites and using 13 different methods (various types of traps), which have now to be identified and classified. This work will take several months, with a series of complementary samples to be taken in 2004 and 2005 at different times of the year.

Preliminary results are expected at the end of 2005 which should tell us whether separate fauna exist in the canopy and the forest floor, and whether there are variations from one site to another. This will allow us, for example, to estimate how many species disappear when a forest is cut down. ■

Placed some 35 metres from the ground, the SolVin Pretzel enabled scientists to collect a large number of insect inhabitants of the canopy. What does walking on the Pretzel feel like? "It is rather springy, so you have to move slowly so as not to disturb the fauna", one of the mission's scientists admits.

One of the goals of the IBISCA 2003 expedition has been to establish a reference collection of insects from the Panamanian tropical rain forest.

[1] *Costanza and al., 1997.*
[2] *Cf. The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, www.entomology.si.edu*