

New European chemicals testing policy ('REACH') – information note

In 2001, the European Commission proposed a new chemicals testing policy known as 'REACH' (which stands for registration, evaluation and authorization of chemicals) which could result in thousands of existing chemicals being tested on millions of laboratory animals in toxicity (poisoning) tests. It is acknowledged that the tests often cause a great deal of suffering, particularly when animals are poisoned to death or substances are applied to their eyes or skin. Draft legislation was published in 2003.

REACH was initiated because of concerns about the possible risks of chemicals which were marketed before 1981. Before that date there was no obligation on manufacturers to test chemicals in order to classify and label them before putting them on the market.

The proposal is currently going through the legislative process. The new European law is expected to enter into force in the second half of 2006, after which the new testing programme will begin.

From the animal welfare perspective, some positive amendments were passed at the first reading in the European Parliament which took place on 17 November 2005. For example, MEPs voted to accept amendments concerning the development and use of alternatives and mandatory data sharing. If retained, these amendments would result in a significant reduction in the number of animal tests carried out, but millions of tests will still take place.

While no-one would deny that chemicals should be evaluated in order to identify risks to human health, it should be borne in mind that an increasing number of scientists believe that non-animal tests often provide more reliable results. Where alternative methods are considered insufficient to assess the risks of a particular chemical, one little-mentioned option is to simply remove it from the market.

The proposals will now be considered by the Council of Ministers. If they amend them, as is very likely, they will then return to the Parliament.

For further information, please see the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection's and RSPCA's websites: www.buav.org and www.rspca.org.uk.