

Tips and tricks of the trade

REACH

Ever heard of REACH? Most probably not. Well, listen up! REACH, the brand new European-wide legislation framework that regulates the handling of chemicals inside the EU, may also affect “downstream users” in biological labs.

Matthias Faix from the poison centre in Bonn, Germany, provides some basic information about REACH.

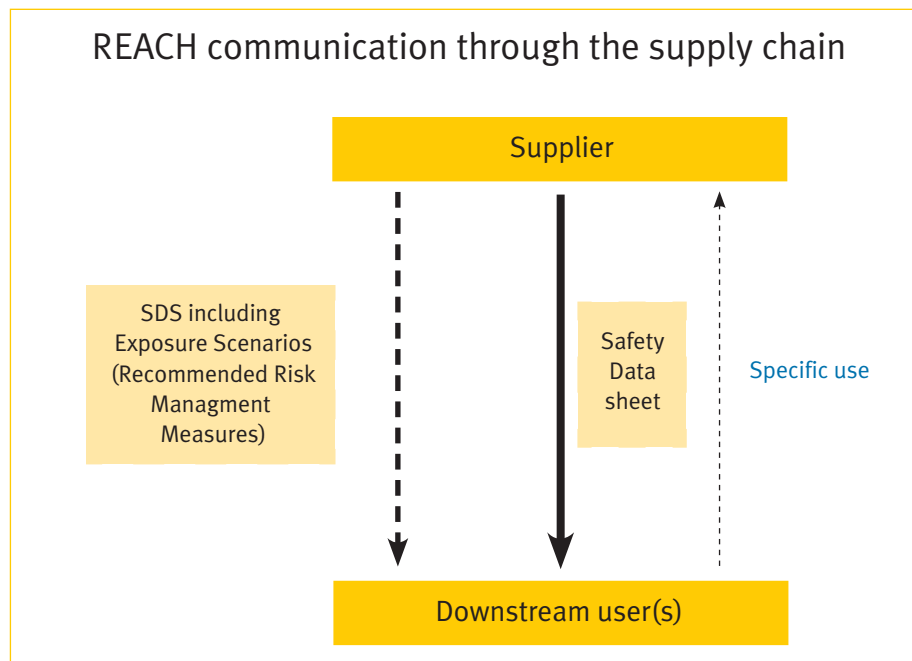
Lab Hint

Dear editor,

Chemical substances used in laboratories, such as ethidium bromide or other colouring agents for DNA analysis, may harm the environment or individuals if not properly used. The main risks of chemical substances for both the environment and the user often arise from a lack of information about the toxic potentials of certain substances. To improve the protection of humans and the environment from risks posed by chemicals, the European Commission launched REACH, a new legislation framework on chemicals, in June 2007. REACH stands for Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemical Substances.

The REACH law, already spanning more than 1,000 pages, regulates how a chemical may be launched onto the European market and delegates the responsibility for risks posed by the chemical to the market introducer. According to REACH, all chemicals with a production scope of more than one tonne per year must be tested and registered. For these chemicals the burden of proof that a substance is harmless has been shifted to the manufacturer – in contrast to former law. Especially for smaller companies producing, for instance, traditional products like boot polish; REACH may become an administrative burden affecting their financial situation (the European Commission has estimated that REACH will cost the chemical industry between 2.8 billion and 5.2 billion euros over the next 11 years). However, not only manufacturers fall under this new law but also importers introducing products from outside the EU. You may recall a case last month when dealers selling toys produced in China containing toxic substances came into conflict with REACH.

Does REACH have any impact on small labs or scientists working in biochemical laboratories? Whereas big companies have to struggle with all the regulations contained in the many paragraphs of the REACH-law, there are advantages to be



gained by the small laboratories and scientists. For instance, in toxication cases, lab scientists benefit from a more rapid and exact access to information because every substance delivered to a lab must be accompanied by a safety data sheet (SDS). If an accident happens in a laboratory, time is short, so proper SDS guidelines may save lives.

However, the information chain established through REACH is not like a one-way street. The manufacturer of a chemical has to provide risk management measures for the special usage of this substance. If the customer changes this scope of usage, it is his duty to inform the producer. If, for instance, biologists in a laboratory apply a microwave oven to melt agarose gels, they have to register this special usage of agarose because it could cause injuries.

There are a lot of commercial REACH consulting agencies offering advice concerning the new legislation. You may also contact your local poison control centre to obtain more information about REACH (though their knowledge concerning REACH may differ). German poison cen-

tres, for example, offer special services associated with REACH. The poison centre at the University of Bonn, e.g. has established a full text retrieval method for easy access to safety data sheets (www.meb.uni-bonn.de/giftzentrale). Companies or labs affected by REACH can download a free-of-charge software application (IUCLID 5) from the European Commission website. IUCLID, which stands for International Uniform Chemical Information Database, has been developed to capture, store, maintain and exchange data on intrinsic and hazardous properties of chemical substances to comply with REACH. For more information on REACH you are also invited to visit the European Chemicals Agency's website at www.echa.europa.eu.

Matthias Faix, Poison Centre at the University of Bonn, Germany)

Do you have any useful tips?

Contact us at:

editors@lab-times.org