Public health: endocrine disrupters, consequences on human and animal health

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Following the adoption by the Commission of a Communication on a "Community Strategy for Endocrine Disrupters" in December 1999, the Council invited the Commission to report regularly on the progress of the work in this field. The first progress report was adopted in June 2001. A second progress report summarising the implementation of the Strategy during the period 2001-2003 was adopted in October 2004. This is the third progress report on the implementation of the Strategy during the period 2004–2006. It describes the developments that have been made in terms of activities on prioritising substances for further investigation, stimulating research, agreeing test methods or adapting legislation.

The "Community Strategy for Endocrine Disrupters" contains activities for the short, medium and long term. The short and medium term actions focus on gathering scientific data on "candidate substances" with a view to prioritising testing, guide research and monitoring efforts and to identify specific cases of consumer use and ecosystem exposure. The long-term actions focus on review and possible adaptation of policy and Community legislation.

In view of the fact that "endocrine disruption" is not a toxicological endpoint per se, but is a class of many mechanisms of action that may lead in different species to various types of effects which may result in adverse consequences on humans and ecosystems, the key short term action is the establishment of a priority list of substances for further evaluation of their endocrine disrupting effects. This prioritisation work started in the year 2000. Some 600 chemical substances ("candidates") have been screened, evaluated and a preliminary priority list established. This work was completed at the end of 2006.

The preliminary priority list of substances for further evaluation is not a negative list of substances but is meant to provide a basis for gathering further data on the endocrine disrupting effects of those substances and for their subsequent evaluation. Between 2000 and 2006 the Commission had three studies conducted on identification and evaluation of substances.

In total 575 substances were investigated over the past six years as to their endocrine disrupting (ED) effects. In terms of prioritisation, it was found that, out of this number, 320 substances showed evidence or potential evidence for ED effects, while in total, 109 substances were not retained in the priority list, either due to insufficient data on ED effects or insufficient scientific evidence. 147 substances have been excluded from evaluation as they were identified as double entries, mixtures or of doubtful relevance.

An assessment of the legal status of the substances with evidence or potential evidence of endocrine disrupting effects showed that the majority of them are already subject to a ban or restriction or are addressed under existing Community legislation, although for reasons not necessarily related to endocrine disruption.

As regards medium-term actions, the Commission and Member States continue to participate in the OECD - Endocrine Disrupter Testing and Assessment Task Force (EDTA), which was set up in 1998 with the goal of developing agreed test methods for endocrine disrupters. It is hoped that the agreed test methods for some environmental and human health effects will be finalised in 2007. Furthermore, endocrine disrupters were addressed under the 5th (FP5 – 1998-2001) and 6th (FP6 – 2002-2006) EU Research Framework Programmes and will also be addressed under the 7thFramework Programme of the European Community for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration Activities (FP7 - 2007–2013).

Regarding long term actions, relevant developments since 2004 are the adoption of the regulation concerning the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), formally adopted on 18 December 2006; the proposal for a directive setting environmental quality standards for priority substances under the water framework directive (2006); and the proposal for a regulation revising Directive 91/414/EC on plant protection products (2006).