Resolution on the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability

2020/2531(RSP) - 10/07/2020 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 579 votes to 18, with 84 abstentions, a resolution on the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability.

The Commission announced, in its communication of 11 December 2019 on the European Green Deal, the presentation of a Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability by summer 2020.

However, the EU and its Member States have failed to meet goal 12 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which calls for sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and for a significant reduction in their release to air, water and soil in order to minimise their adverse impacts on human health and the environment by 2020.

Substantial additional efforts are needed to reach goal 3 of the SDGs and to substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination by 2030. Pollution from synthetic chemicals is a major and growing threat to public health and the environment. About 120 000 work-related cancer cases occur each year in the EU as a result of exposure to carcinogens at work, leading to approximately 80 000 fatalities annually.

Sustainable chemicals strategy

Parliament noted that a sustainable chemicals strategy must effectively reduce the exposure of humans and the environment to hazardous chemicals, and at the same time must enhance competitiveness and innovation in European industry. Important gaps exist in EU legislation for the safe management of chemicals in the EU, including inconsistencies at the level of sectoral legislation and insufficient implementation. These gaps and inconsistencies require legislative action to ensure the effective protection of human health and the environment against the risks posed by chemicals.

Reinforced cooperation between EU agencies

Members stated that there is a need to support the ‘one substance – one hazard assessment’ principle, to allow substances to be reviewed by only one EU agency to speed up and make chemicals regulation more consistent. The Commission is called on to establish a fully connected and interoperable EU chemical safety database so as to facilitate the seamless sharing of data between authorities and provide public access to researchers, regulators, industry and the citizens at large.

Toxic-free environment

Members welcomed the zero pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment and stressed the essential role of the chemicals sector in reaching the multiple targets of the Green Deal, notably the zero pollution ambition, climate neutrality, the energy transition, the promotion of energy efficiency and the circular economy, by offering innovative production processes and materials.

The Commission is called on to:

- present a comprehensive Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability to bring about the necessary paradigm shift to implement the zero-pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment, ensuring a high level of

protection of human health, animal health and the environment, minimising exposure to hazardous chemicals, with particular regard to the precautionary principle and the effective protection of workers and fostering innovation in sustainable chemicals, as the basis for a European strategy for a resource-efficient, circular, safe and sustainable economy, while boosting employment within the EU;

- take measures to speed up the development of low-risk plant protection products and to set up a target of 2030 for phasing out high-risk pesticides;

- recognise chemical pollution (including pesticides) as one of the key drivers of the biodiversity crisis and to come up with legal proposals in order to address the issues of persistent, accumulative and mobile chemical substances in the environment and their adverse effects on ecosystems and biodiversity.

Reduced exposure to endocrine disruptors

The resolution stressed the need to reduce and prevent exposure to chemicals such as endocrine disruptors (EDCs), which have been shown to contribute to significant increases in chronic diseases and some of which can disrupt the immune system and its inflammatory responses, in the context of measures to improve public health and strengthen resistance to viruses such as SARS-CoV-21.

The Strategy should fully reflect the precautionary principle and the principles that preventive action should be taken, that environmental damage should as a priority be rectified at source and that the polluter should pay, as well as cornerstone principles of the European chemicals legislation such as the placing of the burden of proof on manufacturers, importers and downstream users, and that it should effectively apply those principles.

The Commission is called on to present as part of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability an action plan to close the gaps in the current legal framework, giving priority to the products that consumers come into close and frequent contact with, such as textiles, furniture, children’s products and absorbent hygiene products.

Protecting vulnerable groups

Parliament considered that regulatory measures are needed to adequately protect vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant and breastfeeding women or elderly people. The Commission should devote particular attention to chemicals that accumulate and persist in bodies, those that are transmitted to children through pregnancy or breast milk, and those that can have effects across generations. Consistent risk management requirements should be introduced into the relevant pieces of EU legislation regarding substances of concern, including neurotoxins and endocrine disruptors.