

The EU Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability

Learning from the past, looking to the future: reflections on an EU toxic-free environment

Wednesday 14 October 2020 the Commission presented the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability (CSS). The objective of this [webinar](#) was to discuss different perspectives on the published CSS. What needs to be done to transition to a toxic free, climate neutral and fully circular economy?



The slide features a blue background with the title 'The EU Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability' in white, followed by the date '19 October 2020'. Below the title is a grid of nine small video thumbnails showing participants. On the right side, there is a white circular graphic containing the logos of EEB, NL@EU, and Sustainable Public Affairs, along with the text 'This event is supported by: zero mercury working group'.

In the opening of this webinar **Stientje van Veldhoven, the Netherlands State Secretary for Infrastructure and Water Management** kicked-off by emphasising that we need to work together with the same perspective on the future of Europe to transition to a toxic-free environment.

Panel 1: Minamata, learning from the past reflecting on future chemicals policy

After the audience was given the opportunity to prescreen the thought provoking film *Minamata*, a first panel was introduced consisting of Aileen Mioko Smith, Andrew Levitas and Jeremy Wates focusing on the lessons learned from the Mercury poisoning tragedy in Japan and other major pollution incidents around the world. The panelists were asked how these incidents have impacted their personal efforts and to explain whether and how they are still relevant today.

Aileen Mioko Smith, Book Co-author with W. Eugene Smith of 'Minamata', explained how she drew lessons from the years she spent in Minamata listening to the victims and observing their struggle to get justice. She shared hopes that the story will not only honour the victims of this particular event but also lead to greater awareness of pollution in general. Aileen underlined the effectiveness of a large coalition of people joined in a common pursuit and pointed out that leading

by example is important, but also empowering. She emphasized the importance of making climate change and mercury history.

Andrew Levitas, Movie Writer-Director-Producer of 'Minamata', explained that the aim of the movie was to give a broader perspective on industrial pollution and to remind viewers that we are all part of the same community. He wanted to show how the people from Minamata strived to ensure 'there will be no more Minamatas'. In that regard, the Minamata Convention is a fantastic victory. However, he finds that countries need to do more. Andrew pointed out that the right to an 'unpolluted life' is a human right. With the movie he hopes to inspire citizens to be heard and push governments to step up.

Jeremy Wates, Secretary General of the European Environmental Bureau, stressed that robust legislation and enforcement are needed. The EU has made a lot of progress on mercury and other kinds of pollution, but at the same time laws are not keeping pace with the proliferation of chemicals. He noted that the EU should take a leading role in the Minamata Convention. Phasing out coal does not only contribute to slowing down climate change, but also to the phasing-out of mercury. Highlighting that with the CSS the EU commits to 'ensure the most harmful chemicals no longer find their way into consumer products', he questioned whether or not the Commission will put this in to practice, for instance when it comes to phasing out mercury added fluorescent lamps?

In an interactive conversation with **Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice President of the European Commission**, Laura Shields asked about the importance of the strategy for the EU's broader ambitions to become the most sustainable continent in the world and how it will impact the lives of EU citizens.

Reflecting on the importance of movies such as Minamata, Frans noted that humanity can only advance if we are able to self reflect and develop our critical thinking and that it essential that the arts are key for this. Furthermore, responding to the question of Jeremy, Frans pointed out that the EU has already done quite some work on mercury, but that it is not finished yet and that he will look into what can be done on lightbulbs. He further stressed that coal is on the way out and that there is no future for coal as a source for energy generation in the EU, and globally.

The Green Deal is about sustainable growth and health is a prerequisite for that, Frans stated. He stressed that health cannot be sacrificed on the altar of economic growth. The CSS is the effort to put health front and center and simultaneously give industry the tools to innovate to enable us to move towards climate neutrality and help us solve issues. He stressed the importance of not creating a panic about chemicals, but that we do need to take control of the most intrusive and dangerous chemicals, such as PFAS, endocrine disruptors and hazardous chemicals in toys.

Frans underlined that the strategy will change the procedures so that we don't have to endlessly discuss every individual chemical but that this can be done in a more comprehensive manner and enables us to indicate in a much earlier phase if a group of chemicals is harmful and should be excluded. This new method allows the EU to react quicker and create clarity for stakeholders across the board. He further emphasised that in preparing these proposals it is key that stakeholder views are taken into account and that there is a level playing field in getting the different voices heard.

Regarding the global role of the EU, Frans Timmermans emphasized that all global players *want* to be part of the EU market and that that gives the highest EU standards the propensity to become global standards. He further stressed that the EU cannot disregard that EU producers sell things on other markets which we already know are bad for our health, and pointed to the need to be fair and make sure that standards that are applied in the EU are also applied to the products that the EU exports to the rest of the world.

Panel 2: The Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability, building blocks for a toxic-free environment

By introducing the second panel Laura started a more in-depth discussion on the recently published EU Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability, its main goals and how it could effectively address the needs existing at the societal, market and governance levels.

Marius Vaščega, Head of Cabinet Environment, Oceans and Fisheries (European Commission), briefly presented the CSS explaining that the strategy has a triple objective: to strengthen protection, encourage innovation and make legislation simpler. For protection, the precautionary principle will be leading and chemicals will be evaluated by groups. For innovation, the European Commission promotes the development of alternatives with a 'safe-by-design' objective in mind. EU research and innovation will be encouraged with financial support and incentives.

Diana Visser, Sustainability Director at Corbion, welcomed this 'progressive' strategy noting that it supports frontrunners like Corbion, which is applying the Green Chemistry principles and aims to preserve what matters. Diana explained that Corbion applies the precautionary principle in innovation and is developing sustainable substitutes and that it hopes the CSS supports this and makes it competitive. She cautioned that financial support should benefit innovation across the value chain (incl. academia and frontrunners), not only big companies struggling with changes. She drew attention to current market prices not capturing the costs of society as a whole and stressed that regulation needs to ensure that prices reflect real costs including externalities. Corbion is innovating to reduce its GHG emission in the entire value chain (including Scope 3) which should be incentivized by the European Commission. In the current ETS, only Scope 1 is considered, not the entire value chain. For Corbion sustainability is a business opportunity and dialogue is important. Therefore Corbion offered to participate in the EU high-level round table.

Monique Goyens, Director-General of BEUC, found this strategy to be ambitious and a major shift, particularly welcoming the focus on vulnerable groups such as children. Stating that safety is a 'right' that is non-negotiable, she stressed the importance of delivering on the strategy's ambition. Monique pointed to the lack of transparency and thousands of dangerous substances not being classified. She emphasized that the Commission will need to be particularly assertive in the roll-out of the strategy, highlighting the precautionary principle and the duty of producers and policy makers to ensure product safety.

Roald Lapperre, Director-General for the Environment and International Affairs at the Netherlands Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, applauded the ambition of the CSS stating that a toxic-free society should be our goal and nothing less. EU chemicals legislation has been effective but persistent problems such as PFAS remain. Roald stressed that the importance of 'safe-and sustainable by design' cannot be emphasized enough, and that innovation and zero tolerance to non-compliance are key, also welcoming the approach to evaluate groups of substances. Recalling the urgency to act, Roald emphasized that each day lost, is a loss for health and the environment. Regarding chemical recycling Roald acknowledged that it is still in its early stages but that it could play a helpful role in the challenges we have. There are some promising developments and he hopes these develop in a way that they can effectively be used.

Marius Vaščega recalled that enforcement is a key priority. The Commission will support the enforcement systems of Member States (i.e. financing and digital tools) and encourage transparency and exchange of information. **Monique Goyens** pointed in particular to online platforms and marketplaces that pose the largest risk and are a major challenge for consumer protections. **Roald Lapperre** acknowledged that more efforts are needed by Member States to enforce at the EU's external borders when it comes to unsafe imports from outside the EU. The EU and Member States

need step up enforcement to ensure a level playing field for EU manufacturers who already have to comply with stricter safety regulations.

The CSS is a win for the precautionary principle but **Marius Vaščega** stated that it will not hinder achieving innovation and safety at the same time. Open strategic autonomy must be at the heart of the EU's response to the crisis. The EU looks very critically at supply chains and manufactures and tries to get the capabilities for its supply chains not to be disrupted. He concluded: 'By being ambitious, by working together we are in fact working to level up to this European DNA and European way of life.'