



Commission defines principles on limiting most harmful chemicals to essential uses

Brussels, 22 April 2024

Today, the Commission has adopted **guiding criteria and principles for what would constitute 'essential uses' of the most harmful chemicals**.

The [Communication](#) adopted today gives industry and investors **predictability** regarding the **manufacturing of products indispensable for the green and digital transition, health and defence in the EU**. It is a concrete deliverable of the [Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability](#) aiming to **improve the protection of human health and the environment** from the most harmful chemicals, and to move towards a toxic-free environment.

Communication on essential uses

The **concept of 'essential uses'** helps assess when it is justified, from a societal point of view, to use the most harmful substances. In cases where the use is necessary for health and/or safety, and/or it is critical for the functioning of society, and if there are no acceptable alternatives, this substance can continue to be used for that purpose for a certain period of time. Detailed provisions should be set in specific EU legislation applying the essential use concept.

The overall aim of this concept is to achieve higher regulatory efficiency and **predictability for authorities, investors and industry** for a **faster phase-out** of the most harmful substances in **non-essential uses**, while allowing **more time for the phase-out** of uses that are **essential for society**. It will also help industry to steer and prioritise investments in innovative and sustainable chemicals.

For uses deemed essential for society, the concept can **give companies certainty** that substances used in critical applications – notably for the green and digital transition, but also security and defence – can continue to be used until alternatives are available.

This concept can also provide incentives under voluntary schemes, such as sustainable finance and in research and innovation, promoting and facilitating the shift towards safer and more sustainable products and methods.

Transition to safe and sustainable chemicals: report from the EEA

To support the transition to safe and sustainable chemicals, the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) published on 17 April, [an indicator framework](#) to assess the drivers and impact of chemical pollution. The report found that while the transition is progressing in some areas, it is just beginning in others. The benchmarking found that more work is still needed to reduce the impact of harmful substances on human health and the environment and provides recommendations for future actions.

Background

Today's Communication is an important deliverable of the [Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability](#). The strategy sets out actions to make chemicals safe and sustainable by design and to ensure that chemicals do not harm the planet for current and future generations, as well as helping foster innovation for safe and sustainable chemicals. This includes prohibiting the use of the most harmful chemicals in consumer products such as childcare articles, food contact materials and textiles, unless these uses are proven essential for society, and ensuring that all chemicals are used more safely and sustainably.

Several innovation and investment actions have been established to accompany the affected industries through this transition. To promote safe and sustainable chemicals and clean production processes, 12,000 projects ran between March 2021 and September 2022 under Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, ERASMUS+, Innovation Fund and the LIFE programme. Over € 1 billion were dedicated to 190 research and innovation projects.

The strategy also draws the attention of Member States to the possibilities of the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) to invest in the green and digital transition of EU industries, including in the chemical sector. Similarly, the '[Transition Pathway for the Chemicals Industry](#)' (published in 2023) proposes actions and conditions to achieve the green and digital transition and improve resilience in the chemical industry.

For More Information

[Communication on essential use](#)

[Joint EEA-ECHA synthesis report on the EU indicator framework for chemicals,](#)

[Chemicals strategy for sustainability Recovery and Resilience Facility](#)

[Transition Pathway for the Chemicals Industry](#)

[Questions and Answers](#)

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Quotes:

"Essential use is yet another tool in our toolbox that can allow us to act faster in eliminating the most harmful chemicals to protect our health and the environment. By adopting criteria and principles that define which uses of harmful chemicals are essential for society, we provide certainty to the industry and investors, but we also send a strong signal that there is no place for harmful chemicals, if they are not essential for society. Safer and more sustainable alternatives exist, they shall now become the norm."

Virginijus Sinkevičius, Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries - 22/04/2024

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