

Talking with VECCO

Interview on surface technology and the EU REACH Regulation

Latest news: VECCO Chairman Matthias Enseling on requirements set out by the EU Commission

Chromium trioxide: The clock is ticking to find alternatives

The EU Commission has prioritised discussions on finding alternative chemicals and technologies affecting future decisions on authorisation applications for chromium trioxide. This has come about because of a ruling by the European Court of Justice. Decisions on authorisations now depend on whether chromium trioxide can be substituted with an existing technology for chrome plating or surface treatments. **A plan for alternatives, which describes possible substitute technologies, must be developed by 10 September 2020. If this is not achieved, there is a risk that authorisation will not be granted.**

This means that VECCO, as representative of one of the major joint (upstream) applications, is facing a significant challenge. **Web conferences with members will commence at the end of April 2020.** VECCO Chairman Matthias Enseling talks about what this means and what needs to be done.

Companies that use chromium trioxide are currently doing it tough. In addition to economic hardships due to the corona virus, the EU Commission has stipulated additional requirements for authorisation applications. All groups that submit joint applications are now in the process of gathering the necessary background information.

What demands are the EU Commission making and how is VECCO dealing with them?

Enseling:

The Commission is asking us and other authorisation consortiums to develop a plan for alternatives to chromium trioxide. Although the focus is on decorative-functional applications, there are other uses which are also being discussed. It is essential to look at technologies which are, in principle, currently available and to assess their applicability. The EU Commission is referring here to a ruling by the European Court of Justice on the authorisation of chrome pigments. We have also received requests from the EU Commission because we have several authorisations pending. The deadline for our main application, which many refer to as the VECCO application, is 10 September, 2020.

What does this mean for VECCO? What is being done?

Enseling:

Vecco and Eupoc have put together a team that is currently working on answering the questions put forward by the EU Commission. We have been asked to outline which applications can actually be modified. However, this is not just about technological feasibility, because commercial aspects must also be considered. This

must be taken seriously and done fairly. To do this, we intend to make use of VECCO's cooperative approach to finding an alternative, which is already in motion. It's important that working on a substitution plan is not just lip service. Let's not forget that the aim of REACH is to find alternatives to SVHC products (Substances of Very High Concern). Without a substitution plan there will be no authorisation.

What does that mean in practice?

Enseling:

Suitable alternatives to chromium trioxide must be readily available and must be presented to the Commission for each application. Otherwise, it must be proven that there is no alternative to chromium trioxide. The substitution plan must show how existing alternatives can be used or describe ways of getting there step by step with a view to the future. Since the companies concerned are all downstream users, which means that they often cannot implement alternatives themselves, this can only be done in cooperation with customers. For example, I myself have had dealings with the chrome plating of valves. In discussions with several experts, some of whom have experienced long authorisation periods themselves, I have been told that only one thing counts at the end of the day: Meeting customers' requirements!

In the automotive world, this means that in the end the decision is made by those responsible at the major car manufacturers. Sometimes it's not just about technical properties. Are consumers really asking for this? Or is the brand philosophy, the chief designer or the responsible engineer behind the decision? Where is the impartial expertise that committees and our members use to base their decisions about the future? In our view, such weighty considerations must be integrated into the decision-making process along all supply chains.

What would a substitution plan for upstream authorisation look like? Isn't that extremely difficult?

Enseling:

The whole procedure needs to be upstream, otherwise ECHA would be lost in a tsunami of applications (*Ed: upstream here is a technical term for joint authorisation applications from a larger group of users*).

Having said that, the EU Commission's REACH Committee wants alternative technologies to be presented as transparently as possible – even at a micro-economic product level; this would mean thousands of plans that would never be fully completed. Nobody could do this.

So what is happening now?

Enseling:

Compared to the usual approach to substitution plans, we are preparing a different type of substitution plan for our joint application. Due to the large number of current and future applications, we aren't focusing on specific applications in detail. Rather, we are interested in showing the way forward for technical developments in our member companies. In some cases, this may involve an alternative. In other cases, the analysis will show that alternative technologies are not technically or socio-

economically feasible. However, it may also just be a case of 'not yet', which brings us to the subject of realistic review periods.

The aim is to show companies that they have a future. This will be made possible by developing evaluation criteria that enable the companies to make a decision – as a basis for preparing investments in new technologies. Framework conditions for selecting and implementing suitable alternatives for Substances of Very High Concern will also be defined.

The major advantage for our companies is their long-term relationship with their customers. Cooperation in the research and development of technologies, including alternative technologies, can safeguard existing supply chains and at the same time meet the requirements set out by the EU Commission. Only the companies themselves can do this.

What are VECCO's plans moving ahead?

Enseling:

We haven't finalised all the details yet. However, we have already made a start with the implementation. Due to our organisational structure, which is very different from other consortia, we also have other goals and options. For example, due to the structure of our association, we have always had a lot of information about our users, whereas other groups are currently trying to compile this. By this I mean exposure data as well as information on specific uses and applications. We don't need any more general surveys. What we need now is tangible contact with our members. For them, it is a matter of future strategy and survival. We are working on this together and that is the great strength of VECCO.

Groups such as VECCO could be the key to new upstream approaches that the EU Commission or the European Chemicals Agency are looking for.

This doesn't just apply nationally, but also on a much larger scale. The aim is to create a European innovation platform for sustainable coating technologies. This will launch with a group of interested partners. Our idea is to start at European level with partners from the Netherlands, Finland and Italy. We already cover Germany, Austria, Switzerland and parts of Poland.

REACH isn't just an issue that concerns German speaking countries...

Enseling:

That's true, and the timing is very important. We have been asked to submit the substitution plan by 10 September 2020, otherwise there will be no authorisation. That's why we are counting on the cooperation of VECCO's members. The type of plan and its contents will be determined by their experience with alternatives. The main focus is on how alternatives can be used in individual companies. At the moment, this is a difficult time for such a plan. The corona pandemic means that many companies are facing enormous challenges. Our own issue must also take a back seat at the moment, we must have understanding and tact. Perhaps some of

our members could use this 'downtime' to reflect on the situation in their own companies.

Starting at the end of April 2020, web conferences will be held in small groups with all members to discuss the details. There will also be one-on-one discussions regarding the specific circumstances in various companies.

We also plan to take part in research and development projects. These projects will not only explore technologies but also economic effects. We are looking to develop models and procedures together with economic institutes and other interested organisations. And we will be talking with relevant authorities as well as the suppliers of alternative technologies.

You just mentioned the corona virus. Could its spread have a major impact on your work?

Enseling:

Of course the current situation affects us, we are no different from any other organisation in the world. This is especially true for the automotive industry, which is so important in Germany, as it is at a standstill. Temporary plant closures and reduced working hours have become the norm at many sites. This changes everything. But at some point, there will be light at the end of the tunnel again. And then we will be there and so will our member companies. We are making use of the time now to do important groundwork. Developing a substitution plan doesn't require personal contact. And at some point, the committees in Brussels or Helsinki will be available again, even if it has to be via video conference.

VECCO's main task in the future will be to provide even stronger support for its member companies than ever before. We're very confident that VECCO will also be able to meet this challenge.

We look forward to receiving your feedback at info@vecco.info.

The interview was conducted by journalist Natascha Plankermann.