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GREENPEACE

The deliberate smokescreen alias The voluntary commitment of the PVC industry

Introduction

A voluntary commitment is the industry's standard means of last resort to stop the regulator from proposing legislation when all lobbying has failed. It seems to offer an attractive way out for the regulator: why should he act if industry is acting on its own?

However, voluntary commitments rarely contain more than 'no-regrets' measures - measures that are in the industry's economic interest anyway. In most cases, the industry defines the objectives, hereby steering the agenda according to their priorities, and not according to what action is really needed to protect the environment and human health. The objectives do not normally cover the key problems but try to distract from them by offering action on **side/marginal?/peripheral?** aspects. The public is excluded from the process and there are no possibilities to enforce the industry's promises. And all too often, the little that is offered is not even fulfilled.

Voluntary commitments are perfect for the industry: they promise little and in return the regulator does nothing. If the commitment is accepted, legislative action is postponed, at least for some years, maybe forever, and industry can continue with business as usual. And if industry fails to fulfil even the little it committed to, it won't face any consequences apart from getting the legislation that was proposed earlier.

The Danish example

In October 1988, the Danish Minister of the Environment presented an Action Plan on PVC. However, the Danish industry reacted quickly and in 1991 managed to turn the Action Plan on the reduction of PVC into an 'Agreement regarding the use of PVC'.

The objective of the PVC Agreement has been *inter alia* to keep PVC away from incineration plants by reducing the use of PVC in packaging and other products, and by increasing the recycling of building products. According to the PVC Agreement, enterprises must be responsible for, and finance, the establishment and operation of organisation(s), which set up recycling schemes for building and construction products containing PVC.

Almost ten years later, in June 1999, the Ministry for Environment and Energy reported the following:

"Enterprises have not lived up to the Agreement in financing collection schemes for all building products covered by the PVC Agreement. Consumption of building products and other products, except for packaging, is increasing. ...The total amount of PVC waste is expected to increase in coming years."

"A voluntary scheme, financed by industry, which covers all building and construction products, has not been established. This is clearly unsatisfactory, and on this basis the EPA consider it now necessary to establish regulation of waste with a view to keeping PVC away from incineration plants."

"Overall, the result of the PVC Agreement initiative is not satisfactory and there is a need for supplementary measures. These will include regulation of the waste area as described in WASTE 21, and also other limitations so that the amount of PVC does not increase. In this way the bases for the PVC Agreement of 3 April 1991 have changed, and they will be formally replaced by the strategy in this Report."

With the PVC Agreement, the Danish PVC industry succeeded in postponing legislation for more than a decade. During that time, they have continued to expand happily. Thus the environment has not been protected. The Danish Government is now back at square one, while the environmental problem is even bigger than before.

Voluntary commitment of the European PVC industry

Has the European PVC industry learnt from the Danish example? Yes - they commit to hardly anything. This lowers the risk of being caught later on for not living up to their commitments.

Recycling in general	The industry is making no commitments on total recycling amounts, but only presents expectations. According to their expectations, the total amount of PVC recycling would reach up to 200,000 tonnes in 2010. This represents an increase from 3% of the total PVC post-consumer waste currently to around 4% in 2010 (total post-consumer waste projected for 2010: 4.7 million tonnes). 96% of the PVC waste would still go to incineration or landfill. And it is not even the industry that wants to make this irrelevant improvement of about 1% in 10 years happen. For this recycling volume to be reached, they request support from public authorities to create and organise waste collection schemes. But waste collection represents the crucial precondition and the most expensive part of recycling.
Recycling targets for pipes and windows	The PVC industry commits to recycle in 2005 50% of windows and pipes. These two applications represent only 4% of the total PVC post-consumer waste arising in 2005. The PVC industry does not make these recycling quotas depend on the total of these wastes arising, but on the amounts of waste collected. As the PVC industry takes no responsibility for collection of these wastes (see recycling in general), the targets become meaningless.
Recycling of PVC with hazardous stabilisers	PVC waste pipes and windows contain hazardous stabilisers such as <i>inter alia</i> cadmium and lead compounds. Recycling these wastes would result in the distribution/dispersion? of these substances into new products. The PVC industry finds no fault with this.
Recycling of other PVC applications	The PVC industry admits that there are problems with the recycling of applications other than windows and pipes. These other applications however represent more than 95% of the PVC waste arising in 2005.
Plasticisers	The PVC industry promises to continue to do research and to help policy-makers develop well-informed decisions at the earliest possible time. They will take appropriate risk reduction measures, if warranted by the result of EU risk assessments. In other words, the PVC industry commits to continue lobby policy-makers and to follow the law.
Cadmium	Members of the European Stabiliser Producers Association commit to stop selling cadmium stabilisers to the European Union, Norway and Switzerland, but say nothing about exports. Members of the European Plastic Converters are merely asked not to use cadmium-based stabilisers. In other words, the Plastic Converters can continue to use cadmium stabilisers if they wish and no targets are set to reduce their use.
Lead	The PVC industry state in their commitment that based on the current PVC volume it is anticipated that the 120,000 tonnes of lead stabilisers sold in Europe in 1999 will decrease to 80,000 tonnes in 2010. But based on the projected PVC volume (by the European Plastic Converters) that would mean 105,000 tonnes of lead stabilisers sold in 2010. In other words, the PVC industry will continue to use high quantities of lead based stabilisers.
Incineration	The PVC industry wants to promote and support the incineration of PVC wastes in the disguise of energy recovery. According to the study by Bertin Technologies, incineration of municipal solid waste without PVC results in a profit of around 15 Euro/tonne from energy recovery. Burning PVC on the other hand costs between 20 to 330 Euro/tonne. So PVC incineration can hardly be called energy recovery. The costs come from by the flue gas treatment needed for PVC. This treatment creates significant amounts of hazardous waste (0.8-1.4 kg/kg PVC in non-wet flue gas treatment). The industry tries to distract from this absurdity by calling these hazardous wastes "salt residues". They want to support technology developments to minimise the quantities of salt residues and to develop purification technologies for them. But there is no way around it: as long as PVC is incinerated, hazardous wastes are created, not to mention hazardous emissions.
Landfilling	The problems of landfilling are not addressed in the voluntary commitment.

The voluntary commitment of the PVC industry represents a classic example of distracting from the key environmental problems related to PVC. The industry only presents concrete action on two specific waste streams. These account for 4% of the waste arising in 2005. But the industry does not take any responsibility for the very prerequisite for achieving these targets: waste collection. This makes these promises meaningless. The commitment reveals that the industry is not prepared to discontinue the use of hazardous additives and that they want to promote incineration. It has to be regarded as a cynical attempt to stop the regulator from taking effective action against PVC by offering business as usual.