

Kemia

KEMI

TEOLLISUUS • TUOTTIMUS • TALOUS • KOULUTUS • YMPÄRISTÖ • EJD • NANO • PROSESSI

Vol. 34 Coden: KMKMAA ISSN 0355-1628

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Tilauhinnat

Kotimaassa 80 euroa, muut maat 120 euroa
Kouluille 40 euroa, www.aikakaus.fi
Prenumerationspris i Finland 80 euro,
övriga länder 120 euro
Subscription price (out of Finland) EUR 120
Irtonumero/Lösnummer/Single copy EUR 10
(special issue 5/2007 EUR 15)

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Aikakauslehtien Liiton jäsenlehti

Painos • Upplaga • Printing order 7 100
Forssa 2007
Forssan Kirjapaino
ISO 9002



EDITORIAL

Hands off the ECHA!

The launch of Europe's new REACH regulatory framework at the beginning of June marked the start of a busy first year for the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA). Everything needs to be ready by June 1 next year, when the critical six-month preregistration phase is due to begin.

The ECHA is something of an exception among EU agencies in many respects. A permanent location—Helsinki—was selected in advance, and the Finnish capital has stepped up to the plate in admirable fashion by offering the agency's staff and their families a truly comprehensive range of support and assistance, covering everything from finding housing to understanding the ins and outs of Finnish traffic.

The ECHA is also one of the few agencies that is authorised to take binding decisions. While many of the EU's other agencies act in an advisory capacity, the ECHA will have extensive executive powers in respect of companies operating in the EU.

The ECHA is also one of the EU's largest agencies. The aim is to recruit some 450 specialists in an exceptionally short time. This, in fact, is one of the ECHA's largest challenges and success here will be one of the cornerstones of the success of the first stage of the REACH process.

Those behind and at the ECHA have done their best to ensure that the implementation of the very complicated REACH system, together with its tough timetable, will be as smooth and efficient as possible. The agency's operations are based on detailed forward planning and budgeting. Unexpected developments represent a major risk to getting things running efficiently, particular during the early stage.

Portugal's proposal in July, in its capacity as the current EU President, to cut the budget of EU agencies was especially unwelcome to the fledgling ECHA. The Council of Ministers has initially approved a plan that would cut the ECHA's recruitment budget by a quarter and its overall funding by nearly a fifth in 2008.

Budgetary decision-making in the EU is a long process involving numerous intermediate stages, and the situation can change many times over before a final decision is taken. The uncertainty hanging over the ECHA's budget will not make the new agency's job any easier, however, particularly given its tough initial schedule. The ECHA has planned to recruit 100 people by the end of this year and another 120 next year. What will happen if there is only enough money for 90 positions? A slow-down in recruitment would be likely to undermine the entire implementation of the REACH framework.

It would be equally shortsighted to cut the agency's overall budget as well. Although the plan is to cover the bulk of the ECHA's funding in the future through registration fees, its operations this year and next is dependent on direct EU funding. This is, therefore, the worst possible time to cut funding before the agency is even on its feet.

Decision-making in the EU is notorious for taking one step forward and two steps back before a final decision is arrived at. Undermining the carefully planned start-up of the ECHA—as these proposed cuts would—would threaten the implementation of one of the EU's largest and most economically significant legislative initiatives ever. And that cannot be in anyone's interests.

Leena Laitinen

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