



Health & Consumer Voice

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Towards a European Charter on the rights of energy consumers

On 5 July, a new initiative was launched to reinforce the rights of consumers in the EU, with a proposal from the European Commission for an Energy Consumers' Charter.

The Charter sets out consumers' rights in the field of electricity and gas supply with respect to prices, information and unfair commercial practices. It will help consumers to make informed choices when it comes to choosing suppliers in these areas, following the market's opening up to competition, in (most) EU Member States, by 1 July 2007. The draft Charter will be debated through an extensive stakeholder consultation over the summer and finalized later in 2007.

The EU Electricity and Gas Directives (2003/54/EC and 2003/55/EC), have established consumer rights with safeguards for vulnerable citizens, yet these rights need to be made clear in view of the full market opening.

Emphasis has been given to the importance of transparent information. Procedures for switching from one supplier to another must be efficient.

Towards a European Charter on the Rights of Energy Consumers

The Commission has identified four key goals that the future Charter should focus on:

- improved protection of vulnerable citizens
- improved information for consumers



- less red tape when changing suppliers
- improved consumer safeguards from unfair selling practices.

The Charter will address issues such as:

- Contracts: the Charter lists the minimum elements that every contract with an energy supplier must include
- Supply: the switch to a different electricity and gas supplier without charge
- Connection: the right to receive regular and predictable levels of safe and secure electricity (against payment)

(continued page 2)



In brief



Commissioner Kuneva visits the People's Republic of China

From 23-25 July, the European Commissioner for Consumer Protection, Meglena Kuneva, visited the People's Republic of China. During her visit she met with Mr Li Changjiang, Minister of AQSIQ, the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine, and Mr. Zhou Bouha, Minister for SAIC, the State Administration for Industry and Commerce. The Commissioner also met with representatives of the Chinese industry and consumer associations.

The aim of the visit was to make the best use of the EU-Chinese cooperation framework, as well as exploring future actions to undertake to improve the safety track record of Chinese manufactured non-food consumer goods.

The Commissioner urged Chinese authorities to use the information on safety issues provided for them by the European Commission, and to take corrective action at the source. Mrs Kuneva wanted to highlight the mutual benefits of shared, high safety standards, offering to work in partnership with the Chinese to achieve a high level of product safety.

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/cons_safe/prod_safe/gpsd/index_en.htm

Commission launches consultation on consumer self tests for sensitivity to hair dyes

On 6 July, a group of EU scientists announced a study to assess the health risks related to consumer self tests that detect skin sensitivity to hair dyes. The EU Scientific Committee on Consumer Products (SCCP), adopted a preliminary opinion on these self-tests. A public consultation was launched and will close on 6 September 2007.

In its Opinion, the SCCP highlights that, whilst these self-tests can help, they also pose a number of potential health risks. The random way of conducting these tests and the different instructions on how they should be performed, pose potential health risks for false negative results. This may result in people who are sensitive to hair dyes incorrectly believing they are not, which could cause skin allergies due to use of hair dyes.

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/04_sccp_cons_05_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/04_sccp_en.htm

- Information: on energy supply and contract conditions
- Prices: energy has to be available at a clearly comparable and transparent price
- Dispute settlement: right to simple complaint procedures in the event of disputes
- Unfair commercial practices: banned by the EU Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (to come into force at the end of 2007).

Next Steps

A consultation will follow to discuss the elements proposed for inclusion in the Charter. The advice of stakeholders, such as consumer representatives, energy regulators, the gas and electricity industry and EU Member States, will be taken into consideration. A final document will then be drafted based on this input. The envisioned timeline for this is the beginning of December 2007.

For further information on the EC Communication and the invitation to participate in the public consultation, please visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/cons_int/consumers/index_en.htm

Spain withdraws contaminated toothpaste of Chinese origin

On 10 July, the European Commission confirmed that it had received a formal notification from Spanish Authorities on the withdrawal from their market of two toothpaste brands of Chinese origin, because of risks to public health. This formal notification falls under the EU Rapid Alert system for non-food dangerous products, which coordinates EU response to dangerous consumer goods in the Single Market (RAPEX).

The notification concerns two different brands of toothpaste, Spearmint and Trileaf Spearmint. The presence of diethylene glycol (DEG), a substance used in antifreeze liquids, was found in both. The product was immediately removed from the Spanish market. The notification, which has now been entered in the Commission's RAPEX system, alerts Member States to the potential hazard. Once, a formal notification is handed in by a Member State, there is a binding legal obligation for others to take follow-up actions, as well as informing the Commission and other EU Member States about the measures implemented. The Commission confirmed that the European alert and information system worked well, informing Member States before the first finding of samples of toothpaste containing DEG in Europe. This prompt action enabled an efficient exchange of information.

Following this alert, the Italian Health Ministry decided to seize 20,000 tubes of toothpaste in numerous Italian cities.

In the framework of ongoing dialogue and product safety bilateral agreements with the Chinese government, the Commissioner for Consumer protection, Mrs Meglena Kuneva, travelled to the People's Republic of China on 23-25 July to discuss a variety of issues, particularly in relation to product safety.

Background

The issue became prominent in late May, when Chinese toothpaste containing the dangerous substance DEG was found in Panama, the Dominican Republic and other American countries. The alert spread to the US, where the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) found DEG-containing toothpaste. Additional countries where the batch of contaminated toothpastes has been found include Japan and Canada. On 29 May, the European Commission raised the issue with Member States, asking them to report any developments. The Spanish case is the first occurrence of this type in the EU.



For further information, please visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/cons_safe/prod_safe/gpsd/index_en.htm

Better protection from the sun thanks to European Commission action

On 9 July, the European Commission launched a new, clearer labelling regime on sunscreen bottles that will benefit consumers in Europe. The new labels include a new UV-A logo and a ban on misleading terms such as 'sunblocker' and 'total protection'.

The Commission, in partnership with EU Member States, aims to raise awareness on the key behavioural patterns that are essential, in addition to using sunscreens, to protect oneself from the dangerous ultra-violet (UV) radiation of the sun. This improved labelling system is being phased in and will appear on 20% of sunscreen bottles this summer.

There are two types of UV radiation, UV-A and UV-B. Whilst UV-B is the cause of 'sunburn', UV-A radiation produces premature skin aging and interferes with the human immune system. Both types of radiation contribute to skin cancer.

Improved labelling

The Commission's campaign presents improved labelling for sunscreen products which includes several recommendations :

- Claims such as '100 % protection' or 'total sunblock' should not be used, as no product can provide full protection against UV radiation
- Verbal descriptions (eg. "low", "medium", "high" and "very high" protection) should be used alongside the traditional SPF ("sun protection factor") indicators, to provide guidance on the choice of the appropriate sunscreen product.
- Improved labelling of UV-A protection. The sun protection factor refers to levels of sunburn (UV-B radiation) and not to the effects of UV-A radiation, therefore providing a misleading sense of safety to

consumers when the products do not protect against the latter.

- Industry is beginning to introduce a standardized UV-A logo on its product labels, which indicates a minimum UV-A protection that increases simultaneously with increasing sun protection factor. Only by summer 2008 will this objective be fully attained. However, consumers should be aware that, for the moment, this does not mean that products which do not have the logo do not provide UV-A protection. If they do, however, this should be written on the packaging.



Stay safe in the sun this summer

The most important aspect of sun protection involves appropriate behavioural habits such as:

- ⚙ Avoid excessive sun exposure at peak hours
- ⚙ Whilst in the sun, hats and sunglasses provide good additional protection
- ⚙ Avoid direct sun exposure for babies and young children
- ⚙ Use sunscreen to protect against both UV-B and UV-A
- ⚙ Apply sunscreen in sufficient amounts

The upcoming awareness campaign

A series of new pictograms will indicate to consumers the proper behavioural patterns, such as avoiding sun exposure at peak hours, the existence of new logos indicating UV-A protection on bottles, and the

In brief



The review of the Consumer *Acquis*: stakeholders support a targeted, full harmonisation of the law

Speaking on 17 July at the American Chamber of Commerce in Brussels, on the review of the EU body of Consumer legislation - also known as the Consumer *acquis* - Meglena Kuneva, the EU Commissioner for Consumer Protection, confirmed her view that the legislative follow-up to the Green Paper is a key tool to enhance consumer confidence, as well as ensuring a more transparent and stable business environment.

The European Commission had called on interested parties and stakeholders to express their views on the issues identified in the context of the Review of the Consumer *Acquis*, and this consultation period lasted until 15 May 2007. Overall, the outcome of the consultation has shown that a majority of stakeholders prefer a mixed approach, with a preference for a targeted, full harmonization. The analysis of the results will begin in Autumn 2007, which means that the earliest a proposal can be foreseen is the second half of 2008.

The public consultation on the Commission's Consumer *acquis* has now closed and review of the 330 replies has started.

For further information, please visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/cons_int/safe_shop/acquis/index_en.htm

need to avoid direct sun exposure for babies and young children.

The campaign will be run by the Commission and national partners in the different Member States over the next year.



Further information:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/cons_safe/prod_safe/gpsd/sunscreen/index_en.htm

Bio-preparedness Green Paper adopted by the Commission



On 11 July, the European Commission adopted a Green Paper on bio-preparedness.

The paper is intended to stimulate a debate and launch a consultation concerning reduction of biological risks, as well as improving response capabilities.

In an age of open borders, more frequent and distant travel, as well as the global transport of goods, natural outbreaks are of increasing concern. Cross-border, multi-agency and cross-sector co-operation is critical to an effective preparedness strategy, both in the prevention of disease outbreaks and response to them.

In this context, the European Commission presented a Green Paper with policy options and deliverables

which was adopted on 11 July. The Commission seeks to incorporate the views of stakeholders on the mechanisms already in place to solve their possible shortcomings.

Stakeholders include national authorities in charge of risk prevention, investigation and response, the military, bio-industry, academic institutions and bio-research institutes. The consultation will remain open until 1 October 2007 and all responses will be published on line.

Stakeholders may send their responses by 1 October 2007, to the following e-mail address: biopreparedness@ec.europa.eu

Further information:

http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/biosafety/WHO_CDS_EPR_2006_6.pdf

<http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/biosafety/Biosafety7.pdf>

Commission consultation on smokeless tobacco products

On 13 July, the European Commission, together with the EU Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR), launched a consultation on a scientific opinion on smokeless tobacco products (STPs). The consultation will run until 28 September 2007.

The SCENIHR concluded that all STPs contain nicotine, a potent addictive substance together with carcinogenic tobacco-specific nitrosamines; the latter being particularly dangerous for humans, causing cancer of the pancreas and oral cavity. All STPs cause localized oral lesions and, in some cases, increased risk of fatal myocardial infarction (heart failure). Furthermore, smokeless tobacco is addictive and withdrawal symptoms are similar to those seen in smokers.

Scientific evidence from the US suggests that smokeless tobacco may lead to cigarette smoking. However, different cultural habits and products between North America and Europe lead to caution in extrapolating findings across continents. It is considered impossible to predict smoking trends across Europe if oral tobacco were to be made available in EU countries where it is presently banned.

The preliminary report, available on the web, is open for comment, via online consultation, to gather feedback on the scientific evidence drawn by SCENIHR.

http://eu.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/04_scenihr/scenihr_cons.06_en.htm

HIV/AIDS awareness video on EU Tube

On 11 July, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection uploaded an HIV/AIDS awareness video on the Commission's *You Tube* site or "EU Tube". The video, created initially for the Aids 'Remember Me' event in November 2006, proved to be extremely popular and well-received by the audience.



The video attracted more than 80,000 hits in the first 24 hours alone, together with some very positive feedback by European citizens. The Health and Consumer Protection DG has since uploaded another video on smoke-free environments.

This is an effort on the part of the DG to reach out to EU citizens and better inform them on a variety of health and consumer protection-related issues.

For further information, please visit: <http://www.youtube.com/eutube>

In brief



Health-EU launches e-newsletter

From September 2007, the EU's Health Portal will be producing an online e-newsletter. This will offer citizens a selection of the latest news archives in the field of public health, at both European and international level.

The aim of this e-newsletter is to bridge the gap in the field of public health between the EU and stakeholders. This issue will be sent via electronic format twice a month, providing an update on health topics in 20 of the EU's official languages.

The main topics covered will be: health-care action at EU level, future events and conferences on public health, latest publications and new links on the EU Health portal.



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