

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The UK Voluntary Reporting Scheme for engineered nanoscale materials: fifth quarterly report

22 December 2007

Summary

The UK's Voluntary Reporting Scheme (VRS) for Manufactured Nanomaterials was launched on 22 September 2006. This report provides an update on the scheme's progress during its first fifteen months.

No new submissions have been received since the publication of the last report in September 2007. A total of 9 submissions have been received since the scheme's launch in September 2006, seven from industry and 2 from academia.

Recent developments

Revision of VRS scheme guidance

Further to a recent review of the VRS by the Advisory Committee on Hazardous Substances (ACHS), the scheme literature is being updated to clarify the purpose and aims of the scheme and provide supplementary guidance for anyone submitting data under the scheme. This revised guidance will be published in early February 2008.

Update on how data submitted to the VRS will be used internationally

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Working Party on Manufactured Nanomaterials (WPMN) met on 28 - 30 November 2007 to review its ongoing programme of research looking at the environmental, health and safety aspects of manufactured nanomaterials. Among topics discussed by the OECD delegates was the role that reporting schemes like the VRS can play in building evidence and furthering the international research effort. It was agreed that the OECD should establish a list of manufactured nanomaterials which have been notified to reporting schemes throughout the world. Although this list will contain only the identity of the nanomaterial (name, Chemical Abstract Service (CAS) name and number and composition) and contact point in the relevant competent authority (Defra in the UK), it is hoped that this may facilitate discussions between relevant stakeholders, including owners of the

data, regarding the possible sharing of knowledge. It is hoped that this will enable comparisons which may further understanding of nanomaterials and their unique properties. It is important to stress that the list will contain only the identity of the nanomaterial and that other data will not be shared or divulged without the permission of the owner.

The need to protect confidential information notified to the VRS and similar schemes overseas remains a guiding principle in this context. The views of industry are represented on the WPMN by BIAC - the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD.

Protecting commercially confidential information

It is important to remember in this context that the more data that can be made available for international research purposes, the more useful the findings are likely to be. We would therefore encourage anyone submitting data to the VRS to think carefully when considering what may and may not be commercially sensitive. While the formulation process of a product may justifiably be considered confidential, data about the toxicokinetic behaviour of its nanoconstituents may be of considerable value to nanoscientific research, while being of a less commercially sensitive nature.

We are aware of concerns that data submitted to the VRS could be the subject of a request for public disclosure, for example, under the Environmental Information Regulations. We regret that we are unable to provide a categorical assurance that data would not be disclosed in these circumstances, since the balance of public interest must be carefully weighed in each case. If any such request is received, we will, from the outset, involve the data owner.

Looking ahead

The future success of nanoscience will be determined by public trust. Cooperation between the UK government and our nanotechnology industries, particularly through full participation in the VRS, will be a tangible demonstration of commitment to gaining that trust. The publication of new scheme guidance in February 2008 will include a letter to relevant stakeholders in the industry and research communities, restating the strategic importance of the VRS.

Without partnership working, progress in nanotechnologies will be slow and opportunities missed. When the scheme reaches the end of its two-year pilot period in September 2008, Defra Ministers will receive an assessment of whether the scheme has been successful in meeting its objectives, and options for further action.