

Recycling, a potential 'new and emerging issue

Extract from draft minutes of WATCH meeting on 22 February 2007

8	Recycling
8.1	<p>The Chairman introduced Paul Harvey (HSE Policy Group, Manufacturing Sector - waste and recycling), who gave a presentation on the potential occupational health problems associated with the recycling industry. WATCH was informed that the waste and recycling industry had one of the worst safety records, with an accident rate of five times the national average and accounting for a twelfth of all occupational deaths in the UK. Within the population of 160,000 workers in this industry, 4000 accidents had been reported. The proportion of these workers who were employed specifically in the recycling sector was not known. There was some evidence of ill-health amongst workers in this industry, and some of the potential hazards had been identified, but there was little information on the extent of the potential for harm or on the characteristics of exposures.</p>
8.2	<p>The Chairman reminded WATCH that it had identified recycling as a new/emerging issue in November 2006. He referred to the agreed course of action from the November meeting; that a report supplied by Peter Ellwood (HSL, Horizon Scanning Unit) had now been sent to Helen Casstles (an ad hoc 'COPI' member at the November 2006 meeting). Once Helen's feedback is received, the report and her comments will be given to WATCH. Paul Harvey was aware of the report and commented that it was a résumé of the current situation; it did not predict what will happen in recycling in the future. The Chairman commented that WATCH should therefore not expect to see future trends predicted in the report.</p>
8.3	<p>A WATCH member informed the committee that in Denmark a report on the different ways of recycling PVC plastics had been produced, covering hard and soft plastics (thought to be problematic because of the inclusion of phthalates), exploring appropriate ways of handling these materials. He suggested that it would be useful to engage with people working in the industry to determine what new technologies were emerging and what problems and concerns these might raise.</p>
8.4	<p>A WATCH member noted that during the presentation, it had been stated that the number of people involved in the recycling industry was relatively small. He wondered how the numbers of workers in this industry compared with those in the chemical industry? Paul Harvey replied that at present precise numbers were not known. However, the largest proportion of people employed in this industry are engaged in waste collection.</p>
8.5	<p>A WATCH member thought that it was right to include this topic in the list of new/emerging issues. He thought that much of the industry and the potential exposure situations would fall within the scope of COSHH, in that employers should be assessing exposures and controlling them. He also recollected that from previous experience of battery factories, recycling was the highest</p>

	exposure activity. Therefore, he could see the potential for some aspects of recycling to be relatively high-risk areas.
8.6	Paul Harvey added that there should be benefits for workplace risk management from the environmental legislation that is associated with recycling activities, in that each of the waste streams has to be treated in authorised, licensed facilities. However, a WATCH member responded that in authorising/licensing such facilities the Environment Agency would not necessarily focus on any occupational hygiene issues.
8.7	The Chairman thanked Paul Harvey and concluded the discussion by saying that the original plan for advancing consideration of 'recycling' as a new/emerging issue would be followed. He requested that if any WATCH member would like this issue to be discussed further at the June 2007 meeting, he/she should inform the WATCH Secretariat. He also invited Paul Harvey to liaise with the Secretariat if he had any particular scientific or technical issues that might merit exploration, within the broader context of policy and strategy in this area.
8.8	Actions: When they are received, HSE will combine the views of Helen Casstles with the report on recycling from Peter Ellwood and distribute to WATCH.