

Code of conduct for nanotechnologies

Information on the Swiss retail trade's code of conduct

Nanotechnologies are among the 21st century's key technologies. They comprise technical procedures for the manufacture or targeted modification of material structures between 1 and 100 nanometers (a hundred millionth of a millimeter) in size. In this size range, the physicochemical properties of materials change, and the new properties can be selectively exploited, for instance for cosmetics, textiles or coatings.

Absence of statutory regulations

The present state of knowledge does not allow any definitive conclusions to be drawn on the effects of nanotechnology on health or the environment. Consumers are therefore increasingly calling for mandatory declaration of products that contain nanoparticles.

A binding and consistent declaration of nanoproducts is not possible at the present time owing to the absence of a legal framework at the federal level, particularly a binding definition of nanotechnology or synthetic nanoparticles. The Swiss Federal Office of Public Health and the Federal Office for the Environment are examining the methodological framework in the context of an action plan, "Risk assessment and risk management of synthetic nanomaterials up to 2009". Until a framework is in place, the Federal Government is relying on producers and retailers to behave responsibly.

Leadership role of IG DHS

Swiss consumers are characterized by their pronounced need for product information. Local retailers are therefore in favour of transparent labelling of nanoproducts. On its own, however, the retail trade cannot guarantee credible consumer information. Support will have to come from the entire production chain, from research and production through to sale in the shops.

IG DHS, an association that represents the interests of Swiss retailers, has decided to take the lead in the nanotechnology field. Their tool is the Code of

Conduct for Nanotechnologies that has been drawn up by an IG DHS working group. The group includes experts from Coop, Manor, Migros and SQTs.

By mid-March 2008, the Code of Conduct had been signed by top management at Charles Vögele, Coop, Denner, Migros and Manor.

Binding Code of Conduct

The Code obliges retailers to take a responsible approach to nanotechnology products. Product safety comes first: only products that, according to the present state of knowledge and in the light of their probable use, are not associated with any health or environmental risks.

According to the Code, signatories are expected to require producers and suppliers to provide all the information necessary for assessing the safety of a product. This includes, for instance, the technical specifications, data on any potential risk to human beings, animals or the environment, and information on the added value of a nanoproduct in comparison with its conventionally produced counterpart.

The retail trade undertakes to provide consumers with full information on nanotechnology and to label as such only those products that really do have nanotechnology-based components or modes of action.

Further steps

The IG DHS's existing Nanotechnology working group will continue to meet at regular intervals and support efforts to implement the Code of Conduct.

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