

A less toxic solution

Industry should get behind a European partnership that will explore alternatives to animal testing.

A public-private partnership established by the European Commission this week will boost the development of alternative methods to the animal testing of chemicals. More than 10 million animals are used each year in Europe to test chemicals for

safety. Now Europe is getting serious about developing alternative approaches (see page 144). Chemical manufacturers and political leaders have joined the animal lobby in embracing the alternatives, partly because of the sheer cost of using animal tests to meet new chemical safety requirements.

The European Commission's enterprise directorate this week hosted a conference on these alternatives, jauntily entitled 'Europe Goes Alternative'. It has taken three years of delicate negotiations to get industry on board, but at the meeting six trade associations representing hundreds of companies signed up to a Commission-led

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project with the stodgier name of the European Partnership to Promote Alternative Approaches to Animal Testing. More signatures are expected shortly.

The text of the partnership agreement is rather bland, merely committing companies to agree that reduced use of animals in safety testing is a good idea. But it also commits the signatories to develop an action programme aimed at developing alternative methods. The Commission wants this action plan, which will be based on the sharing of information and the joint development of new approaches to testing strategies, to be in place by spring 2006.

It will need to be. Barring last-minute delays, controversial legislation on chemical testing will get its first reading in the European Parliament this week. The proposed Registration, Evaluation and Authorization of Chemicals (REACH) law would require regulatory approval for all chemicals sold in Europe — including some 30,000 compounds that have been around so long that they've never been registered before. Tests that do not require animals might greatly reduce the costs to industry of obtaining approval.

Scientists at the European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods (ECVAM) in northern Italy — which was set up by the European Commission to develop alternatives to animal testing — argue that animal tests are badly flawed. They say the new drive for alternative methods will improve the science of toxicity testing. And public safety demands that the new tests are shown to be better predictors of toxicity than the existing methods.

To this end, ECVAM scientists want chemicals manufacturers to provide more information, including data on compounds that have

been tested but not brought to market. Companies are reluctant to share this information for proprietary reasons. But it should be possible to derive shielding arrangements that will enable outside toxicologists to access it, without the release of commercially sensitive information about the products that were tested.

The action plan also calls for the sharing of the compounds themselves. These could be used to compare the efficiency of a new test against existing animal tests. It took ECVAM nearly a year to gather enough compounds to prove the value of its new *in vitro* skin irritation test, for example. The action plan would lead to simple procedures for material transfer that respect industry's concerns over proprietary information.

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Perhaps the most difficult point in the action plan concerns its call for the release of more information on the performance of animal tests: how robust, reproducible and relevant are they? The data so far give grounds for concern. Yet industry has been resistant to this.

If the gold standard of animal tests against which new tests are to be compared turns out to be made of tin, the political fallout would be considerable. Public trust in the ability of regulatory authorities and industry to address safety issues would be damaged. But in the interests of a thorough, economically viable and scientifically valid product-safety testing regime, information about the methods used in the past needs to be shared, and fairly investigated. ■