

It's time for REACH to deliver on animal welfare

Written by Keith Taylor on 14 June 2016 in Opinion
Opinion

The upcoming review is a chance to strengthen safeguards against animal testing and help REACH regain its position as a world-leading piece of legislation, writes Keith Taylor.



When the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals law was adopted in 2006, it was hailed as the most important piece of EU legislation for 20 years. The legislation puts the onus on businesses to show that the chemicals they are using are safe.

It is also designed to encourage the replacement of hazardous chemicals with safer ones and spur the chemicals sector into researching and developing more new products.

Upon its introduction, REACH, as it is more commonly known, received a guarded welcome from animal welfare, environmental and health campaigners.

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Why then, 10 years later, are campaigners and citizens writing to me to express their concerns about the way the legislation is implemented? The answer is animal testing.

As Animals spokesperson for the Green Party and Vice Chair of the European Parliament's animal welfare intergroup, I have, and continue, to promote a win-win testing solution that requires the rapid uptake of modern and reliable non-animal testing methods.

During the negotiation of REACH, MEPs were faced with the challenge of having to improve the regulation of hazardous substances while meeting the ethical and political demands of reducing animal testing.

Animal testing has been relied upon too heavily for too long. The negotiations revealed that it is not only cruel but also costly and slow. During discussions, it also emerged that the results obtained from animal tests were often unreliable, and always difficult to interpret.

In response, MEPs from across the political spectrum joined forces to ensure REACH reflected the need for more advanced testing methods.

Improving the science underpinning conventional testing and recognising the limits of force-feeding large doses of chemicals to small animals with short lifespans to predict the effects on humans exposed to small doses of mixtures of chemicals over decades was a key tenet of the legislation.

With fears the legislation would require increased animal testing; Green MEPs led a cross-party campaign to enshrine three simple objectives in the regulations: ensure every available non-animal test method is used, ensure the sharing of animal test data is mandatory and prioritise the development new non-animal test methods. And we were successful. In fact, 10 years on, REACH still includes rules which reflect all those aims.

So what's the problem? Unfortunately, as evidenced by a disappointing number of Ombudsman rulings, REACH has yet to deliver the expected animal welfare improvements. The current implementation of the legislation is not only ignoring the promises made during negotiation but also failing to meet the hard-fought legal requirements set by legislators.

Last year, the EU Ombudsman found that the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) was not doing enough to promote alternatives to animal testing or to ensure that testing was the method of last resort. As a result, ECHA's processes have been forced to undergo several revisions to encourage the avoidance of animal testing.

Furthermore, while the regulation demands that test rules are updated regularly and non-animal methods are adopted as soon as they are validated, these processes are often put into practice too slowly.

However, the recent adoption of non-animal testing methods for skin allergy research is a significant step in the right direction. The EU is the first in the world to adopt this animal-free testing

methodology.

While this is an important win for animal welfare advocates, there are still campaigners worried that REACH requirements undermine the EU's ban on animal testing for cosmetics products. These concerns have been carefully scrutinised and the European Court of Justice is expected to make a ruling soon reasserting the importance of upholding the ban.

On its tenth anniversary, and with the final 2018 REACH registration deadline approaching, we will be fighting, again, for cast iron guarantees to ensure that all possible protections and safeguards are implemented to reduce and, ultimately, eliminate animal testing.

It is clear the fight for higher animal welfare standards is far from over, but with the recent adoption of non-animal testing for skin allergies and the expected ECJ ruling, there is a real sense of optimism. REACH can regain its position as a world-leading piece of legislation.

I will be doing everything in my power to ensure REACH is recalibrated to once again prioritise the adoption of modern, effective, and animal-free testing methods. This is important not just for the sake of animals, but because we too deserve a more reliable testing strategy that better protects and promotes human health.

As a committed animal advocate representing a nation of animal lovers, I recognise the importance of pulling together and working with our European neighbours to ensure that the EU continues to promote animal welfare policies fit for the 21st century.

With the EU referendum fast approaching in the UK, REACH is a great example of the need to work collaboratively to tackle challenges that, in a globalised world, don't respect national boundaries.

The EU is far from perfect, but, with a domestic government committed to a rampant deregulatory agenda, it is the best place to fight for the higher animal welfare and environmental safeguards we want to see in the UK and across Europe.

About the author

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