

Comment on the planned COM Communication on "Chemicals strategy for sustainability"

With the drafted paper "Chemicals strategy for sustainability - Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee of the Regions", the European Commission recognises the importance of substances for the European economy, in particular their important role in achieving the current well-being and comfort of our modern society. At the same time, it aims to ensure that exposure to substances classified as toxic or environmentally hazardous are avoided. The Commission refers to the comprehensive legal framework for chemicals in the EU, while stressing that the current framework is not sufficient to bring about the necessary conversion to production and use of sustainable substances and to promote the substitution of hazardous substances.

The German Steel Federation welcomes the Commission's efforts to strengthen substance-related health and environmental protection. REACH¹, as the regulatory pillar of chemical management in the EU, has succeeded in collecting information on substances that can be useful for health, environmental protection and occupational health and safety. We believe that the existing legal framework is sufficient. The data collected in the context of REACH registrations must be evaluated before any further major legislative changes are made. However, implementation must be uniform in all EU Member States in order not to put companies in individual countries at a disadvantage.

The combination of REACH and CLP² directive has resulted in many substances being classified as hazardous in terms of their potential. However, the danger alone does not allow a statement of the actual risk caused by these substances. This is only partially acknowledged in the Commission's paper and should be further differentiated. It should also be borne in mind that the danger of the substance in itself does not allow a general statement on the risk to health and the environment. This is especially true in cases where metals are firmly embedded in a matrix, as it is the case with alloying elements in steel. Consequently, and irrespective of the danger of the (chemical) alloying component, there is no risk for workers handling this steel or for consumers who use the products.

Against this background, we recommend the politics to recognise the necessity to define the interface between REACH, environmental protection, safety and health at work in a way that can solve this problem in the long term. Removing substances firmly integrated into a matrix from the material cycle and thereby endangering the circular economy would not be sustainable. It would penalise those who have built a functioning circular economy, taking into account environmental and health protection. Additionally, efforts to reduce greenhouse gases would be contradicted.

¹ Directive (EC) No 1907/2006 (REACH – Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals)

² Directive (EC) No 1272/ (CLP – Classification, Labelling and Packaging of substances and mixtures)