

SOAPS AND DETERGENTS

UK supermarkets move to clean up their act

by Cath O'Driscoll

Tesco, Sainsbury's, Co-op, Marks and Spencer, Morrisons, Somerfield and Nisa are the first UK retailers to back a European industry initiative designed to promote safer and more environmentally friendly cleaning products. They have signed up to the International Association for Soaps and Detergents and Maintenance Products (AISE) charter, a voluntary programme by cleaning product manufacturers to continuously improve their sustainability across their product life cycles.

To comply with the charter and carry its logo, participating companies must demonstrate their commitment to a range of AISE-defined standards, addressing such issues as CO₂ emissions, water use, packaging use, biodegradability and waste, occupational safety and consumer information.

The charter, launched in 2004, will build on the success of earlier industry initiatives, says Andrew Williams, director general of UK Cleaning Products Industry Association (UKCPI). By 2001, for example, the industry had reduced its use of laundry detergents by 250 000 tonnes overall, packaging by 15 000 tonnes, and poorly biodegradable organics (PBOs) by 23%, compared with 1996. And by 2003, the standard dosage for powder laundry detergent in normal washing conditions had been reduced by a third to 100g.

Environmental campaigners have welcomed the charter as 'a step in the right direction', but argue that more needs to be done to improve performance. 'There is a need for firm commitments from industry to phase out certain chemicals, including those that can disrupt hormones, or those that are persistent and able to bio-accumulate,' says WWF toxics programme officer Gwynne Lyons: 'Furthermore, industry should have good information on the toxicity of all its products before they can be sold.'

Moreover, industry consultant John Pickup points out that the biggest slice of the total energy consumed in the whole business of making, packaging, transporting and using laundry detergents, including making the raw materials, is that used by the consumer to heat the water for washing. Pickup points to an earlier industry survey on detergents showing that consumers control around: 70% of total energy use, 90% of air emissions and 60% of solid waste.

In Europe, 20 regional and multinational manufacturers are already signed up to the AISE charter, covering more than half the output of cleaning products. UKCPI currently has 40 members, including multinationals such as Unilever, Reckitt Benckiser and Procter & Gamble, and Williams expects 95% of laundry products to carry the charter logo in the next two years. About 60% of products from the industrial and institutional sectors, from dry cleaning agents to chemicals employed for cleaning food and dairy plants, are also expected to be covered.

The UK cleaning industry is estimated to be worth £2.5bn and produces roughly 1m t of soaps, detergents and other products annually.