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Foam insulation groups challenge US NGO criticism

Recent building materials report offers 'incomplete picture'

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Foam insulation groups say that an NGO report that cautioned against their products "ignores science" and focuses too heavily on the mere presence of a chemical in a product.

The criticism has come in response to a **report** authored by the Energy Efficiency for All NGO partnership, which ranked insulation and air-sealing products based on their chemical composition and potential health effects, as well as their performance and costs.



Foam insulation materials were among the products the authors cautioned against using in their report, *A Guide to Healthier Upgrade Materials*, due in part to their containing certain halogenated flame retardants or isocyanates. And a co-author has defended the study in a statement to Chemical Watch.

But Stephen Wieroniey, director for the American Chemistry Council's (ACC) Center for the Polyurethanes Industry, told Chemical Watch the report "presents a simplistic approach to complicated issues, and it ignores decades of established and accepted science".

And Betsy Bowers, executive director of the expanded polystyrene foam group EPS-IA, said the report "does not have data to support a widespread boycott of foam plastic insulation materials".

"The absence of credible, scientific and specific sources calls into question the validity of the guide's claims," added Justin Koscher, president of the Polyisocyanurate Insulation Manufacturers Association (Pima).

"A close look reveals that the authors rely inappropriately on sources unrelated to the manufacture and use of building insulation," he told Chemical Watch.

Points of criticism

Among concerns raised by the industry groups is that the report focuses on what chemicals a product contains, without appropriate regard for other attributes, such as thermal, fire, moisture and environmental performance.

"Time and time again we're reminded that selecting products based on a single attribute stifles innovation, drives up costs by eliminating options, and leads to poorly performing, and expensive to run, homes and buildings," said Mr Koscher.

The ACC added: "Simply identifying chemicals by potential hazard offers an incomplete picture of both the ingredient and the product itself, and misses important factors needed to accurately account for safe use of chemicals in building products."

And groups also disputed that the presence of a chemical indicates a health concern. Speaking on behalf of the spray polyurethane foam (SPF) industry, the ACC's Mr Wieroniey said that the product is "inert and non-toxic when fully cured". The finding, he said, is upheld by the US EPA.

Ms Bowers also raised several points regarding the authors' focus on halogenated flame retardants, which serve an "important purpose" in building materials.

She noted that NGOs have "failed repeatedly" in their efforts to change building codes and remove requirements that flame retardants be used in foam insulation materials.

"They simply did not present compelling or even sufficient test data or fire performance analysis to ensure fire safety standards would be maintained in the absence" of these substances, she told Chemical Watch.

Furthermore, both the EPS and extruded polystyrene foam (XPS) industries **have completed** a voluntary phase-out of HBCD from their products. The report, however, indicates the presence of the substance as a cause for concern with their use.

Industry groups also said that the report fails to take a full lifecycle view of products, ignoring the energy efficiency attributes of foam insulation, while also neglecting "environmental challenges" posed by materials that the NGOs endorsed.

"Decisions about chemical ingredients must be based not on the mere presence of any chemical, but on scientific approaches that consider how and how much of a chemical is in a product and whether occupants may come in contact" with them, added the ACC.

The report authors were not persuaded by the foam insulation groups' arguments, however.

"The most reliable way to avoid exposure is to avoid the use of the toxic chemicals all together," Rebecca Stamm, senior researcher at report co-author Healthy Building Network (HBN), told Chemical Watch.

"Energy-efficiency materials containing toxic chemicals can adversely affect residents, workers, adjacent communities, and locales as far away as the Arctic," and alternatives with fewer worrisome ingredients are already available, the EEFA report says.

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