

GHS Implementation: New Opportunities!

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Presenter biography

Paul Trenchard is the Regional Product Stewardship Lead in the Global Product Stewardship & Regulatory Affairs section providing product stewardship support to ExxonMobil business units. He has worked in Europe and USA in a number of product stewardship related roles and has practical experience in addressing developing chemical control regulations. Paul graduated in Chemistry and has an M.Sc in Environmental Pollution Science and holds a diploma in Occupational Hygiene. He has worked in the oil and gas industries for the past 30 years in Europe and the USA and has been involved in numerous product stewardship projects with a focus on hazard communication and the training & development of others.

Presentation abstract

Following implementation of the Global Harmonized System (GHS) in several countries, there have been a number of comments questioning whether GHS is really harmonized. This question is explored together with a review of the potential opportunities associated with wider adoption of the system.

The UN Global Harmonized System was conceived and the international mandate agreed during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. Harmonization of many different classification and labelling schemes around the world was coordinated by the Interorganization Program for the Sound Management of Chemicals Coordinating Group for the Harmonization of Chemical Classification Systems. The starting point for the various harmonization teams was a detailed review of existing classification schemes and criteria. After 10 years effort the first edition of GHS was adopted in December 2002. Subsequent revisions have been adopted every two years. Understanding the history is necessary to appreciating how GHS has indeed increased harmonization compared with the past.

GHS is not a mandatory UN scheme and since countries may elect to adopt (or not) different classification classes and hazard categories, there is often a perception that GHS is not harmonized. In fact the establishment of common terminology to describe categories of hazards such as irritant, toxic, etc., together with detailed criteria to define the severity of the hazard is a significant accomplishment. Standardization of label text providing hazard information and precautionary advice based on detailed criteria is another success for GHS. Label management utilizing standardized phrases (translated as appropriate) is now more practicable. With respect to safety data sheets (SDS), many countries have transitioned or adopted the 16 section format (harmonized section headings and section order) with some variants e.g. the European Union where an Annex is intended to augment safe use information in the body of the SDS. It is now easier to prepare globally consistent SDSs aligned with GHS while still accommodating national differences.

While transitioning to GHS presents challenges (as with any change), there are also opportunities for those willing to explore the possibilities. For companies marketing products globally it is now easier to establish standardized practices and procedures related to: the SHE assessment of products, the authoring of safety data sheets and the labelling of products. Evaluation and compliance with in new markets is, in many cases, less complicated for countries that have adopted GHS or will accept GHS criteria if they have no specific classification/labelling regulations.

Over time, differences in how GHS criteria are interpreted and applied by individual companies and national authorities should slowly reduce. The different classifications of identical substances still exists and is a topic of much discussion, but ongoing improvement and clarity of GHS can support industry efforts to continue to provide the best protection of workers and the environment.