Position Paper



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Microplastics

The European Union (EU) has adopted in 2023 a restriction regulating Synthetic Polymer Microparticles (SPMs) intentionally added to products under the EU chemical legislation REACH[1] [2]. The intention of this restriction is to prevent the release of SPMs to the environment. This restriction prohibits the sales of SPMs as such, and of products to which SPMs have been intentionally added.

When justified, derogations apply to the SPM users affected by these new rules. Although derogations exist, communication obligations to customers and reporting obligations to authorities apply. The European Commission is also working on measures to reduce secondary microplastics (those generated via wear and tear), for which paints and coatings might also be in scope.

CEPE members support efforts to avoid environmental pollution. We believe the presence of microplastics in the environment is an issue that needs to be tackled, and we welcome sound scientific research to identify the sources of microplastic pollution and how to minimise them. However, we are concerned about the scientific validity of some current reports, so CEPE is taking responsibility for the sector and has commissioned new research. A sound scientific basis is essential for policy and industry measures.

The need for paints and coatings

The coatings industry is an important contributor to the sustainability goals of the European Green Deal. Coatings protect an enormous variety of products and surfaces, increasing service life, reducing maintenance and waste and contributing to a circular economy.

There are countless other benefits - reflective coatings on buildings can reduce energy consumption for cooling, and on roads can increase safety. High-performing antifouling paints are essential to reducing ship fuel consumption, decreasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, preventing translocation of invasive species, and minimising underwater hull cleaning.

[1] Commission Regulation (EU) 2023/2055 of 25 September 2023 amending Annex XVII to Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) as regards synthetic polymer microparticles (OJ L 238, 27.9.2023, p. 67).

[2] Synthetic Polymer Microparticles: polymers that are solid and which fulfil both of the following conditions: (a) are contained in particles and constitute at least 1 % by weight of those particles; or build a continuous surface coating on particles; (b) at least 1 % by weight of the particles referred to in point (a) fulfil either of the following conditions: (i) all dimensions of the particles are equal to or less than 5 mm; (ii) the length of the particles is equal to or less than 15 mm and their length to diameter ratio is greater than 3.



The contribution of paints to microplastic pollution requires further research.

Regarding primary microplastics, only a part of the paint formulation falls under the definition of primary microplastic that are intentionally added, such as polymeric binders e.g. latex.
Coating formulations are mixtures of several different ingredients (typically water, solvents, pigments, additives, and binders). Water is the main ingredient for most consumer paints, with the polymeric binders helping to hold the ingredients together. Once applied, the polymeric binders, such as latex, join or coalesce to form a continuous film. At this stage the polymeric binders are no longer considered a SPM.

Secondary microplastics can potentially form if a paint layer degrades due to being exposed to the weather. However, there is currently no firm evidence that this effect is a major contributor to microplastic pollution in the environment.
Furthermore, the paint industry has taken measures to reduce solid emissions. These range from process optimisations such as overspray reduction and paint removal practices to developing paints that last much longer and guidance on brush and roller cleaning to reduce emissions by DIY users.

Professional painters are also taking measures to reduce the release of paint particles and dust during their work, such as capturing sanding residues.



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State of the science

The American Coatings Association (ACA) conducted a literature review in 2022 aimed at establishing the state of the science and available data on microplastics generated by paints and coatings. The conclusion is that there is no clear data quantifying the contribution of paint to microplastic pollution in the marine or terrestrial environment.

Many of the reports employ a range of assumptions regarding paint degradation rates and removal practices to estimate the contribution of paint.

CEPE is concerned that some reports significantly overestimate the contribution of paints.

CEPE has initiated a research program to provide data

Given the lack of clear scientific data and inconsistencies in reports, CEPE had commissioned independent studies aimed at better understanding degradation of paint films and subsequent release of secondary microplastics, particularly from building facade coatings. These studies will enhance the industry's knowledge of coatings-related microplastics and provide a better basis for regulatory discussion.

What are we proposing?

- More research based on sound science to fully understand the source of secondary microplastics in the environment.
- Supporting the education of professional paint users in paint recovery and waste management to minimize the amount of waste entering the environment.
- Further information for consumers on the proper handling of paints (purchase, use, disposal) such as a European wide consumer awareness campaign.

CEPE, The European Council of the Paint, Printing Ink, and Artist's Colours Industry represents the interests of Paint, Printing Ink, and Artist's Colours manufacturers in Europe. As the voice of the sector to the European Union, we discuss with all stakeholders to improve the framework conditions in Europe. We support policy making based on science that leads to a more competitive, healthier, and sustainable future.

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