

European Commission Hails Council Agreement to Protect Workers Exposed to Electromagnetic Disturbance

European Commission, October, 2003

The European Commission has congratulated the Italian Presidency on securing agreement at today's Council meeting on legislation designed to protect the health and safety of workers exposed to electromagnetic fields and waves. The directive requires employers to carry out assessments of the risks posed to their employees from electro-magnetic fields, for example from electricity generation, radio and TV broadcasting antennae, mobile phone antennae, radar installations, or large furnaces of the type used in the metal industries. The directive sets out issues that should be covered in this risk assessment, for example certain direct and indirect effects, such as interference with medical equipment e.g. pacemakers, or ignition of flammable objects.

"We are all committed to achieving better protection of the health and safety of workers exposed to risks at work", said Anna Diamantopoulou, Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs. "The scientific data available shows that overexposure to electromagnetic fields can have serious consequences for workers' health. The directive foresees preventive actions to protect the health and safety of workers, in particular against induced electric currents in the body, shocks and burns, and absorption of thermal energy produced by electromagnetic fields."

The directive sets out maximum levels for exposure and also establishes levels at which preventive measures must be taken by employers. Depending on the outcome of the risk assessment, employers may also be required to draw up an action plan of organisational and technical measures in order to reduce levels and to put up warning signs in areas with excessive levels of electromagnetic field. Employers are also required to provide adequate information and training for workers that might be at risk.

For workplaces open to the public, if an evaluation has already been made in line with Council Recommendation 1999/519/EC on the limitation of exposure of the general public to electromagnetic fields, and this evaluation excludes safety risks, then the employer is not requested to perform a new evaluation of the exposure levels.

Scientific data shows that overexposure to electro-magnetic fields can have serious consequences for workers' health. The directive is intended to provide for preventive measures in particular against induced electric currents in the body, shocks and burns, and the absorption of thermal energy produced by electromagnetic fields. Adequate medical surveillance is essential to ensure that any injuries are diagnosed in good time by specialised health professionals.

The proposal applies to all sectors of activity but chiefly concerns workers exposed to a high risk of irradiation. This will include those working in heavy industries such as steel or metallurgical treatment. Other workers affected include those working for long periods near TV and radio broadcasting installations, radar installations and mobile phone masts, and even cashiers exposed for long periods to anti-theft devices used in shops.

This directive is the third in a package of four health and safety directives designed to protect workers from the risks arising from exposure to physical agents. Directives have already been adopted on noise and vibrations and a fourth on optical radiation will be proposed by the Commission next year.

end