

## **Q&A: Campine discusses outlook for antimony trioxide**

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Antwerp, 1 October (Argus) — "Spotlight on regulation" is the theme at this year's international antimony association i2A annual conference. *Argus* spoke with Wim De Vos, chief executive of Belgian firm Campine, the largest antimony trioxide producer outside China, about the regulatory and economic pressures facing the flame retardants industry and the company's strategy.

**The regulation of flame retardants is extremely complex. Can you explain why the use of antimony trioxide in flame retardants is being reviewed and what the potential implications are for the industry?**

Antimony trioxide is just one chemical among many other chemicals being reviewed as part of the next stage of the EU's Reach health and safety initiative. There are similar reviews under way in other regions, including the US. As a result of all these reviews we could see some regulatory changes in the coming years.

What you need to understand is that the issue here is not the use of antimony in final products. What is being investigated is the manufacturing of antimony trioxide powder and how best to protect workers against chemical contamination. To give you an analogy, we all know that if a baker inhales a lot of flour it could lead to health problems, but we still eat bread. It is about manufacturing safety and ways to make sure it is always at the highest possible standard. We expect to see the first findings from the Reach evaluation in about a year and perhaps regulations in 2-3 years.

**Demand for flame retardants is sometimes linked to overall economic growth. Do you think this is a fair analysis and how do you see demand in Europe and other regions over the next 18 months? Are you seeing very different growth rates for specific products?**

We are seeing tougher fire safety regulations for construction and automotive all around the world, including really big markets like China. So I think the use of flame retardants will actually outperform GDP. And I think these two sectors — construction and automotive — are the biggest growth areas. Trioxide is used in other applications such as PET catalysts and in the pigment industry.

**Prices for trioxide grade metal have fallen sharply over the past year on a slump in prices in China. Prices bottomed out at a 30-month low of \$5,800-6,000/t in early September before rebounding to \$5,925-6,125/t on a jump in prices in China. Why did they fall so far and how has this affected the flame retardants industry?**

Prices went down for two reasons — oversupply of concentrates and metal, and low antimony trioxide demand from the flame retardants sector. But lower prices have had a positive impact for the industry. Campine would prefer prices to remain low because it means that antimony trioxide flame retardants are seen as reliable and the best option economically. If the price tripled, we would see substitution because it would just be too expensive. We have seen this in the past. If prices went over \$10,000/t, we would risk it just being phased out.

**Antimony is exempt from US tariffs on Chinese exports. Have you seen an impact from the US-China trade war?**

We have seen a little bit of influence. Some US antimony trioxide users are getting nervous and are feeling unsure about what would happen if the situation gets worse. If there ever was a real escalation then they would have to buy from non-Chinese sources. Over 90pc of global supply of antimony trioxide is produced in China and Europe. So US consumers do not have many options.

**What is the company's strategy and how much antimony trioxide do you produce?**

We are the only company in the Benelux region that recycles car batteries and this is our core business. So, we are a recycling company that also has a specialty chemicals division where we

produce flame retardant solutions. The main activity there is antimony trioxide production, of which we produce 12,000 t/yr, all of it at our plant in Belgium. We are also one of the world's largest trioxide-grade metal buyers at around 10,000 t/yr.

Besides being part of the circular economy, the other important direction for us is a transition from providing an antimony trioxide product to providing customised flame retardant solutions, with added value. We do not just want to provide safe-to-use products but also supply customised flame-retardant material solutions, which contain other additives besides antimony trioxide.

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