

EU fire safety plans prompt industry discussion on flame retardants

Grenfell Tower incident has raised need for action

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European trade groups, the International Antimony Association (i2a) and the International Bromine Council, are planning to "better communicate the important role" flame retardants play in the EU's plans for fire safety in buildings.

The 2017 fire at London's Grenfell Tower, which killed more than 70 people, and a 2015 incident at a nightclub in Bucharest that killed more than 60 people, have prompted EU authorities to review fire safety.



To improve communication among member states and relevant stakeholders, the European Commission created the Fire Information Exchange Platform (Fiep), which met last week. The Commission explained that it is examining the feasibility of a European fire safety code.

This work could have implications on the use of flame retardants in building products, materials and furniture. And, as a result, [i2a](#)¹ focused its second annual antimony event on the current perception of flame retardants, communication gaps around the benefits of substances and how they can contribute to the EU's plans.

The flame retardants industry is the biggest user of antimony compounds. The compounds do not have flame retardant properties, instead they act as synergists. Adding small amounts of antimony compounds to chlorine or bromine substances increases the flame retardancy of a material, the association's secretary general Caroline Braibant told Chemical Watch.

Antimony can be added to PVC, for example, where it works with chlorine to reduce the level of oxygen in the material and therefore lowers the chances of ignition, she said.

The two day event – which brings together producers and users of antimony compounds – covered the need to:

- engage people in ongoing exposure control initiatives;
- clarify within industry consumer exposure from products; and
- communicate more broadly about the positive aspects of flame retardants.

"On one hand the EU is looking into better fire safety standards, largely a result of the UK's Grenfell incident. But on the other side they want less hazardous chemicals used in products," Ms Braibant said.

These two objectives, she said, are difficult to reconcile because antimony, bromine and chlorine substances have intrinsic hazardous properties. However, they are some of the best-performing flame retardant solutions and their intrinsic properties do not necessarily imply a risk for the users or consumers.

"Risk only happens where exposure to these chemicals happen above the level at which they start to express their toxicity," she says.

Some brominated and chlorinated flame retardants are **listed²** on the UN's Stockholm Convention of persistent organic pollutants. Echa has also restricted the use of brominated flame retardant decaBDE in certain products and materials.

"We agree that the hazards are there at different levels, but there is no exposure, or at least no major exposure, that would justify a stop in using flame retardants because of their chemical risk," said Ms Braibant. For antimony, participants at the event declared that this posed little problem because they are "embedded in the plastic".

The recycling of materials containing antimony, bromine and chlorine flame retardants was also raised. "Sorting processes that ensure the antimony containing plastics are not mixed with other sources of plastics already exist," said Ms Braibant.

However, there is still more to be done to make the recycling of antimony from flame retardant plastics and textiles economically viable.



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