

An overwhelming majority of member states have voiced support for stricter EU rules on drinking water, saying the same level of safety should apply to products coming in contact with water as for those coming in contact with food.

Toxic substances should be eliminated from all products and materials used in the treatment and delivery of drinking water, EU environment ministers said on Monday (25 June).

"After all, tap water is a type of food and therefore should be dealt with in the same way as other foodstuffs," said Portuguese environment minister João Pedro Matos Fernandes, referring to strict EU laws applying to materials like wrappers and other plastics used in food packaging.

"There is no reason in our view why water contact materials should be treated differently from food contact materials," said Stientje van Veldhoven, the Dutch State Secretary for Infrastructure and Water Management, echoing her Portuguese colleague.

But a European Commission proposal to harmonise standards for products coming in contact with water in buildings - such as plumbing - was dismissed by a majority of environment ministers as inappropriate to deal with what many regard as a health issue. The Commission proposal to harmonise EU standards through the construction product regulation "is not sufficient," and "will not cover all products in the entire water chain," said the Polish environment minister, Henryk Kowalczyk.

The construction product regulation is "not the right tool" to address the issue "because it is not focused on health and safety," said the Greek deputy environment minister, Socrates Famelos, echoing a sentiment that was almost unanimously shared.

Brussels "must go further" and try to "cover all the materials coming in contact with water, from the point of extraction to the tap," added Brune Poirson, the French state secretary for the environment.

The EU's Drinking Water Directive is currently going through a revision process. Article 10 of the directive introduces new obligations on member states to assess the health risks of products and materials coming in contact with domestic water distribution systems - like plumbing used in people's homes.

"When materials are in contact with drinking water, impurities can leach into the water [and] may cause a significant risk to human health or may deteriorate drinking water taste and odour," stated a study by the European Commission's environment directorate published last year.

To address the issue, the EU executive proposed harmonising standards for pipes and other products coming in contact with drinking water in the EU construction product regulation. That idea was widely dismissed as insufficient at Monday's meeting, although a majority of

EU environment ministers expressed support for greater harmonisation at European level. The need for harmonisation regarding materials and products in contact with drinking water was continuously highlighted during the consultation process with interested parties before the revision of the directive, the Commission pointed out. "Article 10 of the Directive concerning 'materials in contact with drinking water' leaves Member States too much flexibility in determining what 'necessary measures' are," the EU executive argued, saying this could be addressed in the construction products regulation.

The discussion on materials coming in contact with water echoes a similar debate on materials coming into contact with food.

Earlier this year, the European Commission called on companies to increase the take-up of recycled materials in their production processes and said it will look into whether recycled plastics can be safely used in food contact applications.

But environmentalists warned about a risk of "contamination" from old products containing legacy toxic chemicals that are now banned and argued against lowering safety standards for "secondary materials" coming from recycling.

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