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EU ECOLABEL FOR WOODEN FLOOR COVERINGS

**BEUC and EEB comments on the criteria proposal
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Summary

In May 2015 the Joint Research Center (JRC) of the European Commission (EC) published a new version of the EU Ecolabel criteria for Wooden Floor Coverings. The technical report and the draft criteria have been discussed at the 2nd Ad-Hoc Working Group (AHWG) meeting which took place on 28 May in Brussels.

BEUC and EEB have expressed concerns regarding the change in scope for this product group. By changing the content of wood from 90% to 80%, and maybe to 75%, there will be higher content of other materials that have harmful impact on the environment and on the consumer.

As regards to the origin of wood, BEUC and EEB highly recommend to use 100% of the wood coming from certified sustainably managed forests.

Finally, BEUC and the EEB strongly recommend to set ambitious limits for hazardous substances and we require testing both the components AND the final product in order to ensure a good indoor air quality and minimize the harmful effect on consumers' health.

Less wood content means more chemicals

The change in the product from 90% to 80% content of wood, wood powder and/or wood/plant based materials has been proposed after the 1st AHWG meeting in October 2014 with the aim to promote the EU Ecolabel among manufacturers.

During the 2nd AHWG meeting, the JRC - supported by industry - has suggested to lower further the percentage of wood in the final product from 80% to 75%. We have already expressed our disagreement during the first consultation round and we reiterate our concerns regarding this change in the content of the product.

Considering that the current Ecolabel criteria require 90% of wooden material in Floor Coverings, EEB and BEUC are concerned that lowering this requirement to only 75% will lead to a less ecological product. An increase of 15% of other materials than wood which are made of non-renewable sources implies almost doubling the current amount of synthetic or plastic components, which can also lead to higher emissions of formaldehyde or Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) and a higher negative impact on the environment. Besides the negative environmental impacts inherent to the non-wooden components there may be possible negative effects on recyclability as mixing together materials of a different type are always problematic. Additionally, depending on hazardous substances potentially present in the material, waste materials of mixed wooden flooring might have to be treated as chemical waste¹.

BEUC and EEB want to avoid any hazardous substances that could undermine the product's potential for re-use, remanufacturing and recycling activities which will become more and more important in a circular economy. Hazardous chemicals present in the product will without any doubts hinder the recycling process, remain in the recycled material and therefore affect consumers' health during the second life of the material. In the context of a circular economy, we consider that the EU Ecolabel is an excellent tool to promote and allow safe, efficient and high quality recycling. The EU Ecolabel can contribute towards reaching the recycling target set by the EC and closing loopholes in a circular economy. We reiterate that the objectives of the EU Ecolabel scheme are to promote safe and environmental-friendly products in a matter of health and environment protection.

We strongly recommend to the JRC investigating further and coming up with stringent criteria on dangerous substances and waste treatment.

¹ According to the COMMISSION DECISION of 3 May 2000 replacing Decision 94/3/EC establishing a list of wastes pursuant to Article 1(a) of Council Directive 75/442/EEC on waste and Council Decision 94/904/EC establishing a list of hazardous waste pursuant to Article 1(4) of Council Directive 91/689/EEC on hazardous waste: waste from wood preservatives, wastes from inorganic chemical processes, wastes from organic chemical processes, wastes from the manufacture, formulation supply and use of coating paints (paints, varnishes and vitreous enamels), adhesives, sealants, have to be treated as hazardous waste.

As our initial recommendation has been maintaining 90%, any lower threshold will not be supported by consumer organisations and environmental NGOs.

BEUC and EEB would like to make a suggestion that the JRC has not considered in their report but that we think can have a very valuable contribution for consumers. We suggest requiring manufacturers to apply a detailed composition label in a standardized format on the product which would properly inform the customer about the materials and their quantities being used in the product. Since there are many possibilities of materials such as cork, wood and bamboo, it is essential that the customer knows exactly what the material he is buying for floor covering is made of.

Future scope and name of the product group

With regard to the scope of the product group we ask for two changes:

- 1) Cork should be included
- 2) Hybrid floors should be removed

With regard to cork we believe that many consumers who are interested in sustainable consumption could have an interest to be informed about this product group through the EU Ecolabel to facilitate their purchase decisions.

With regard to hybrid floors, we insist that such products should not be able to obtain an EU Ecolabel as hybrid products have a larger variety of surface layers such as carpet or PVC and these materials are much more likely to contain undesirable hazardous substances.

Moreover, we suggest changing the name from currently "Wooden Floor coverings" into "wood derivated floor coverings" to prevent consumer confusion. The term Wooden Floor coverings could give the false impression that only wood is present in the product. This is already currently not the case but in particular if the Commission finally decides to increase the content of other materials that can be present this product group name would become misleading.

Ecolabelled floor coverings should come from sustainably managed forests

We highly welcome and support the provisions added by the JRC regarding the origin of uncertified material (in bold below) as we think that this brings a significant added value to the Ecolabel by avoiding material coming from controversial and unsustainable sources:

"If the product or product line includes uncertified virgin material, proof should be provided that the content of uncertified virgin material does not exceed 30 % and is covered by a verification system which ensures that it is legally sourced **and meets any other requirement of the certification scheme with respect to uncertified material.**"

We remind that the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) have high standards for non-certified material, which go beyond verifying the legality of the wood. Indeed, they also tackle wood harvested in violation of traditional and human rights, wood harvested in forests in which High Conservation Values are threatened by management activities (HCVs are areas particularly worth of protection), wood harvested in forests being converted to plantations or non-forest use, Genetically Modified Wood. This is why it is very important that the uncertified materials meet the requirements of the FSC and PEFC which go beyond the legality of wood.

However, the EEB and BEUC still highly recommend having requirements that 100% of the wood coming from certified sustainably managed forests, instead of the current 70% threshold proposed by the EC.

Criteria should clarify that no GMO wood can be used

EEB and BEUC insist that Ecolabelled wooden floor coverings should not contain Genetically Modified (GMO) Wood and the final criteria document must clearly state such a ban. The GMO wood might indeed be covered under the criterion 1 on sustainable wood. As the FSC and PEFC schemes do not allow the use of GMO Wood, we accept a cross-referencing to these schemes in the criteria document.

However, BEUC and EEB do not support allowing other certification schemes in addition to FSC/PEFC without naming them explicitly in the criteria document and without assessing whether the criteria concerning non-GMO wood are stringent enough. In our view referring to too many other schemes is not useful because it always contains the risk that the criteria of other schemes change over time which makes enforcement quite complicated.

Flame retardants should not be allowed in EU Ecolabel floor coverings

We disagree with the derogation proposed for flame retardant H351 as we do not consider its use as necessary. We remind that flame retardants are not needed nor compulsory to fulfil fire safety requirements in domestic houses, in public and commercial buildings; there are no legal requirements existing for normal floorings.

In addition, manufacturers who were directly asked by the EC at the technical meeting confirmed that they do not need flame retardants when producing wooden floor coverings. There is therefore no obstacles to ban them completely from EU Ecolabel products.

Contaminants in recycled wood should be further restricted

We support the provisions added at the end of the 1st paragraph (in italics):

"Any recycled wood fibres used in the manufacture of wood-based panels included in the final wood-based floor covering product shall be tested for delivery conditions in accordance with the 2002 EPF standard conditions for the delivery of recycled wood (table 3.1) or any other national regulation in place with equivalent or stricter limit values."

We agree with the fact that if national mandatory legislations in place are stricter, the applicant has to comply with this national legislation and there is no need to require additional testing in accordance with the European Panel Federation (EPF) Standards. Avoiding double testing result indeed in time and cost savings.

However, taking into account that the national rules differ, this could lead to conflicts regarding the coherence of the scheme and it could trigger competition between the Competent Bodies for new applicants which might want to shop around for the lowest requirements. If thresholds for contaminants are not the same for everyone, it would result in slightly different levels of contaminants being present in EU Ecolabelled products, depending on in which country the applicant requested the Ecolabel.

BEUC and EEB are concerned that the Commission still proposes to apply the EPF standards as limit values for contaminants in recycled wood, like in the first draft criteria proposal published in October 2014. Indeed, we are concerned about the ambition level of these EPF values: BEUC and EEB consider that these values are not stringent enough compared to the German recycled Wood Directive (Altholzverordnung). Likewise they are not stringent enough compared to the test parameters set by the Naturplus label. We strongly recommend the JRC coming up with a more ambitious proposal to further reduce the level of contaminants in wood.

Further restriction of plasticizers needed in next proposal

We ask the Commission to further restrict the potential use of plasticisers in wooden floor coverings as most of them are carcinogenic, mutagenic, toxic to reproduction (CMR substances) but also persistent and bio accumulating which qualifies such substances potentially as "Substances of Very High Concern" based on Article 57 of the REACH Regulation. Such substances should not be present in Ecolabelled products and we remind that plasticisers are NOT needed for laminate floors. As there is no reason not to restrict their use, we ask the JRC to propose an additional requirement on plasticizers in the next draft.

This is also why we do not want to include hybrid floors in the EU Ecolabel scope as plasticisers can be used for some hybrid products.

Hazardous substances: 0.1% threshold should be applied per layer

In the revised version of the criteria, the JRC proposes to consider the whole product as basis for the calculation of the limits of hazardous substances that can be present in the final product. Therefore, the JRC proposal is to restrict hazardous substances that are present in concentrations above 0.1% by weight of the total product.

We point out the lack of stringency of the proposed approach. If the 0.1% threshold is applied to the whole product – in particular to products which have a heavy weight per se such as wooden floor coverings, the criteria would not tackle hazardous chemicals that can be present in small quantities in each different component of the final product. We are in favour of a stricter requirement, which is to apply the 0.1% threshold *by weight of each of the different parts of the floor covering*, such as the upper layer, the core board and the balance bottom layer (or under layer). Therefore, hazardous substances above 0.1% by weight of the layer should be considered and assessed. Our approach brings more stringency with regards to hazardous and unwanted substances present in the components of the floor and would result in safer final products.

We are aware that the JRC aligns with the existing 0.1% threshold set by the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) in its guidance on Requirements for Substances in Articles. However, it does not mean that we agree with this alignment, especially with regards to heavy products as this approach would allow a high quantity of hazardous chemicals. This is not in line with consumers expectations and would undermine the credibility of the EU Ecolabel.

Formaldehyde threshold should stick to E1 50%

BEUC and EEB reiterate the importance to limit formaldehyde emissions to 50% of the threshold value allowing them to be classified as E1, which is the applied standard for normal production. We remind that formaldehyde is currently classified as a Category 1B carcinogen (H350 - may cause cancer). The ambition level of the formaldehyde requirements is in line with the Japanese standard which is considered as one of the front-runners in the sector.

In addition, we hold the view that BOTH, the particle board core AND the final product should be controlled and should not have more than 50% E1 Formaldehyde emissions.

Some industry stakeholders have stated at the technical meeting that controls and tests only on the final product were sufficient and proposed to limit the formaldehyde emissions to E1 which is the threshold for all boards today. On the contrary, we think it is more relevant from a consumer and safety perspective to carry out testing at an early stage to avoid any hazardous substances being present in the final product. In addition, the board which is labelled with the EU Ecolabel should have an added value compared to the other boards existing on the market, so it is not relevant to have the same formaldehyde restriction as in non-labelled, conventionally produced board.

It is true that once the covering layers are applied on the final product, they mask formaldehyde emissions which do not get out of the panel and therefore the formaldehyde emissions from the final product will be very low. However, it does not mean there are no emissions as those contained in the panel will be released as residues over time into the indoor air once the product is already installed in consumers' homes. Hence checking the components and materials that make of a product at an early stage is very useful. Therefore, the threshold of 50% of E1 in raw core board and finished the product should be implemented.

Consumers' exposure to VOCs emissions should be reduced

Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) are of high concern from a health and environmental point of view. Exposure to these harmful chemicals results in respiratory, allergic, or immune effects in infants or children are associated with man-made VOCs and other indoor or outdoor air pollutants. A major source of man-made VOCs are coatings, especially paints and protective coatings and this is why VOCs are of major importance in the Wooden Floor Coverings product group. We consider it as an important role of the EU Ecolabel to be an instrument which can be used to contribute to lowering the exposure of consumers to VOCs through setting very ambitious requirements.

We generally support the thresholds proposed by the JRC in the criterion on indoor climate. Some thresholds (Total organic compounds within the retention range of C6 to C16 (TVOC), and Total organic compounds within the retention range of > C16 to C22 (TSVOC)) have been questioned by industry stakeholders during the technical meeting who suggested to lower them in alignment with the Blue Angel or Nordic Swan criteria. BEUC and the EEB see the usefulness in general to align between the requirements of different schemes but disagree in this case as it would result in a loss of ambition.

We encourage the JRC to lower the threshold for carcinogenic substances from 0.004 mg/m³ (the current EU Ecolabel limit) to 0.001 at least. A threshold of 0.001 mg/m³ is the current value in the Blue Angel requirements and we therefore believe the same limit value should be set for the EU Ecolabel.

In addition, we strongly encourage the JRC to lower the initial R-value from 1 to 0.5.

We remind that the EU Ecolabel should be the most ambitious scheme and acts as a front-runner in setting stringent criteria, and therefore it is logical to align with the most ambitious and meaningful requirements existing or to go even beyond.

Ecological products mean ecological packaging

The EEB and BEUC disagree with the withdrawal of a criterion related to packaging. Wooden Floor coverings are bulky products which therefore possibly come along with a huge amount of packaging.

It is very incoherent to produce an ecoproduct and wrap it in a non-ecologic packaging. In addition, we believe finding more environmentally friendly packaging is possible without too much burden and costs for producers.

The Blue Angel sets a very relevant criterion for this product group: the products shall be packed for sale so as to allow post-manufacture outgassing of volatile elements. We call for this criterion to be included into the EU Ecolabel criteria.

Wooden Floor Covering should achieve Class 32 for private and commercial use

The criterion on Fitness for uses states that:

“Wooden floor coverings shall achieve at least:

- Class 32 for floor coverings for private use;
- Class 33 for floor coverings for commercial use.”

BEUC and EEB hold the views that floor coverings should achieve class 32 for private use AND commercial use. Our rationale is that class 32 guarantees the product’s resistance, durability and therefore an expanded product lifetime, which is one of the main features of ecological products. Besides, the class 32 is always recommended to consumers by the staff working in building supply stores. Even big manufacturer like Quick Step in the United Kingdom advertises their laminate floors by making reference to the class 32 on their website. Please see for further information:

<http://www.quick-step.co.uk/Articles/Quality-standards-for-laminate-flooring>.