

The Copper Voluntary Risk Assessment - Q&As



Overview

- 1 - What is the copper VRA?
- 2 - Why did the Industry decided to do a VRA now?
- 3 - How was transparency and impartiality guaranteed?
- 4 - Who financed the VRA?
- 5 - How did you determine copper's health and environmental risks?
- 6 - So you have completed the Assessment. What are the next steps?
- 7 - How does the VRA help us respond to people who are convinced that copper is a toxic, heavy metal?
- 8 - Does copper present any health risk to workers who work directly the material?
- 9 - Are any tasks at special risk?
- 10 - What were the biggest challenges ECI faced in developing the VRA?

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1 - What is the copper VRA?

The copper industry's Voluntary Risk Assessment is a scientific study initiated by the copper industry to evaluate the risk for man and the environment when exposed to copper.

Its results were agreed by the scientific and EU regulatory community, making copper the first industry to complete a voluntary risk assessment in Europe.

2 - Why did the Industry decided to do a VRA now?

The VRA was put in place to ensure that the copper industry was prepared for the entry into force in July 2007 of REACH, the EU's regulation on chemicals and their safe use. The process started back in 2000 and was completed in April 2008.

It was also the industry's response to unsubstantiated press coverage on copper's health and environmental risks. The VRA gives the industry the necessary scientific proof to react and demonstrate the safety of the current productions methods and uses of copper.

3 - How was transparency and impartiality guaranteed?

Right at the start of the VRA, the process was agreed with the Italian Government's Istituto Superiore di Sanità, which acted as a review country on behalf of the European Commission and the EU Member States. The European Copper Institute, the initiator and driver of the VRA, worked closely with scientists, European Institutions, individual countries and the industry itself to ensure objectivity, credibility transparency and high quality of information.

The final version of the document has been agreed by the Commission's Technical Committee for New and Existing Substances.

4 - Who financed the VRA?

The European Copper Institute built a consortium to fund the copper risk assessment to fund the project. The consortium included 60 individual copper-related companies, including producers of copper metal, powder and chemicals, along with representatives of downstream users.

An industry steering committee of producers and downstream users oversaw the project.

5 - How did you determine copper's health and environmental risks?

All EU risk assessments are divided into two steps. The first involves quantifying the emissions to the environment and the exposures to human health. This includes collecting and processing data from production, use and disposal. The second step is to determine at what levels these emissions or exposures start to give rise for concern.

The European Commission provides a Technical Guidance Document on how to quantify the emissions and exposures, setting the levels and ensuring a common approach to issues such as methodologies, data collection and analysis methods.

6 - So you have completed the Assessment.

What are the next steps?

The copper Industry has committed itself to start a risk reduction measurement plan in the limited cases where a concern for human health risks were suspected and ensure its deployment onsite.

7 - How does the VRA help us respond to people who are convinced that copper is a toxic, heavy metal?

The wording "heavy metal" refers to the molecular weight of a metal and has no toxicological meaning. Copper is an essential nutrient to all life forms and therefore the statement that copper is a toxic heavy metal is not appropriate. The risk assessment has evaluated copper deficiency as well as copper toxicity.

8 - Does copper present any health risk for workers to directly handle the material?

The VRA concluded, from the measured short term and repeat exposure levels for workers, that no risks are anticipated during copper smelting, copper melting and casting or from any further copper processing.

9 - Do any tasks pose special risk?

The VRA concluded that attention is needed with regards to the use of adequate risk reduction measures during bagging operations for the production of copper powder and copper compounds (automated bagging and/or use of RPE) and for smelting and casting operations (use of RPE).

10- What were the biggest challenges ECI faced in developing the VRA?

Given the copper has been in use for centuries, thousands of scientific studies exist on its role in the environment and human health. The key challenges were to identify the most relevant datasets, to develop meaningful methodologies to fill important data gaps, and to then explain the logic for our findings with the authorities.