The changing regulatory landscape – a retrospective on ERA’s annual environmental compliance conference from 1999 to the present

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It is seventeen years since ERA held its first ever environmental conference, “Recycling Electrical and Electronic Equipment”, on 23 February 1999. It was a crucial time for environmental product policy. The WEEE and RoHS Directives were still three years off adoption and so this and the second conference held on 24 November 1999 were very well attended events, probably because there were very few conferences on what was then very new proposed environmental legislation. Journalist from six trade magazines attended the first event.

Initially, the main topic was WEEE, with only one paper at the second conference on hazardous materials substitution. The third event in November 2000, as all have been since, was held over two days and covered both WEEE and RoHS issues and included two papers on eco-design, primarily with a focus on aiding recycling. By the time of the 5th conference, in 2002, both the WEEE and RoHS Directives had then been adopted and so discussion moved from what these might look like to how do you comply?

From 2003, the scope of the conference began gradually to broaden with one paper on the then proposed REACH Regulation. In 2004, therefore, the conference’s name was changed to “Designing and Recycling Electrical and Electronic Equipment” to reflect the ever widening range of legislation with which industry was being required to comply. This was also the only conference to be held outside of London, in Birmingham and included part of a paper on the EuP (Energy using Products) Directive, the rest being on WEEE and RoHS. The 2005 conference included a paper on the new China RoHS legislation, one on eco-design and another paper included REACH.

The range of papers presented at the 2006 conference, which was the year that the RoHS directive took effect, was markedly different with more than half, not surprisingly, on RoHS issues, but there were also papers on US legislation, China RoHS, EuP and REACH.

The name changed again for the 2008 conference to “Electrical and Electronic Equipment and the Environment” and this name is still used today. This was the first event to include a paper on enforcement of the RoHS directive (by NWML –now RDD). REACH was now in force and the first paper on how to comply was presented and there were papers on Asian and US legislation, eco-design and the first on batteries. So by 2008, the number of pieces of legislation discussed had increased from two (WEEE and RoHS) to five in the EU plus more in at least four other countries. A similar range of topics
were covered in 2009, but the proportion of papers on RoHS and WEEE declined even further to 24% on RoHS and just one paper on WEEE, which was now maturing, with several papers on the rapidly changing EuP and REACH.

The proposed RoHS and WEEE recasts had been discussed at the 2009 conference, but these topics grew in importance in 2010 with several papers presented. From 2010 to 2013 most papers covered substance issues (RoHS and REACH), end-of-life (WEEE), and ecodesign, and a few on similar non-EU legislation. 2011 saw the first coverage of compliance issues beyond health and the environment in the shape of conflict minerals – a subject which has grown in prominence since 2012 with three papers on the proposed EU conflict mineral legislation at the 2013 conference. Sustainability had been briefly mentioned at some earlier conferences but took on greater importance in 2013 with two papers on resource efficiency. By 2014, the range of issues had grown significantly since the first conference in 1999. To WEEE and RoHS were now added ecodesign, batteries, conflict minerals, sustainability, packaging, batteries, China RoHS and US legislation.

Delegates from over 160 companies have attended the ERA conferences since 2012. The most recent conference in 2015 was again well attended, perhaps indicating the importance of how environmental legislation impacts on electrical and mechanical equipment across all product sectors.

The usual range of issues was discussed at the 2015 conference, but with the addition of new topics; nanomaterials, circular economy, export controls and critical raw materials. This continuing growth in environmental legislation that affect electrical equipment is reflected in the large number of regular attendees at the event. Data from Compliance and Risks supports this, showing that the number of global laws on chemicals (to pick you one example) has increased from 106 in 2003 to 503 in 2015.
Compliance and Risks have also found that the number of laws in its database for the Europe, Middle East, Africa and central Asia region, which includes the EU, has risen by a factor of 6 from 1,013 in 2003 to 6,428 in 2015.

We have so much appreciated the contributions of so many expert speakers representing key policy makers (from ECHA and the European Commission to BIS, DEFRA and DECC), market surveillance, trade associations and leading companies covering engineering product sectors from aerospace and defence to medical and consumer electronics, prominent NGOs, and technical experts.

Edif ERA has been pleasing to be able to provide a convivial forum where current developments and best practice can be shared and explored. We hope this has been as stimulating for those of you who have attended as it has been for us and we look forward to supporting you into the future.

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