

Press release

6th International Nano Authorities Dialogue "Governance of Nanomaterials" hosted by the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN)

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The 6th International Nano Authorities Dialogue with Government officials from Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein and Switzerland took place on 8 /9 May in Zurich. The Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) invited representatives of public authorities dealing with regulatory issues of nanotechnology in health, environment or occupational safety areas. The topic of the two-day conference was the communication of scientific data and public dialogue. The participants discussed how scientific data and information could be transformed into relevant information for the public and involved stakeholders. Besides this topic the participants discussed current developments in regulation, research and education on the national and international level. The annual Nano Authorities Dialogue series is being organized and moderated by the Innovation Society, St.Gallen since 2008.

Switzerland as Host of the 6th International Conference

Dr. Gérard Poffet (Vicepresident, FOEN) welcomed the numerous delegates from Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein and Switzerland on behalf of the Swiss Government and the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN). In his opening speech he emphasized that the Swiss Federal Offices are dealing with engineered nanomaterials for nearly 10 years. The Swiss Government has published a Nano Actionplan in 2008 where several measures are listed which should be taken in order to guarantee a safe and sustainable development of nanotechnology and nanosciences in Switzerland. One of the key elements in the action plan is the strengthening of public dialogue and communication with the public. Gérard Poffet mentioned that the communication of scientific data on both opportunities and risks of nanotechnology should stick to scientific facts on one hand and must be understandable on the other hand. These are the preconditions for an objective process of opinion forming and public debate. Open and transparent scientific communication should be used to inform about the state of knowledge and also about the areas of ignorance. Thereby unfounded fears could be omitted without playing the potential risks down. He also mentioned the importance of this annual meeting for an informal exchange of experiences among European public authorities and stakeholders from industry, academia and politics.

Many Nano Activities: Actionplans, Research Programs and Stakeholder Dialogues

Several speakers presented the ongoing nano activities in their countries and on a global level. Focusing on national research strategies national and international action plans and numerous communication and stakeholder dialogue activities in the specific countries. There are actually many parallel activities in the European countries going on. In all German-speaking countries there are presently national action plans with different activities. There are also numerous national or international research programs which are initiated by authorities and which are conducted by research groups or in cooperation with industry. Many of these research programs are focusing on scientific risk research projects on environmental, health or partly occupational safety topics. In Switzerland the national research program NFP 64 "Opportunities and risks of Nanomaterials" comprises actually 23 different projects. The NFP 64 program was presented by Prof. Peter Gehr who is president of the steering committee. He gave a short overview of the structure and the goals of the program. Prof. Rik Eggen (EAWAG -Vicepresident) presented the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (EAWAG) and highlighted the role of a national research institution as an interface between scientists, public authorities and the public. On the basis of three practical research projects on nanomaterials in aquatic systems the results and the transformation process from scientific data to publicly understandable information was discussed.

Nanotechnology in the Media

On the second day Prof. Heinz Bonfadelli from the University of Zurich presented the role of the media in the information and communication process. He illustrated media reality and effects of media using the example of nanotechnology. While the number of nano articles in the past few years has decreased the public perception of nanotechnology in Switzerland and other European countries is still positive. The state of knowledge of nanotechnology is comparably high. In the dissemination process the so-called "push-media" (press, radio, television) are very important as they actively provide information to the consumers. On the other hand most of the information on nanotechnology is actually presented on "pull media" (e. g. online information platforms). Many public authorities present their information on such platforms, where the interested public can pick information according to specific interests. These platforms play an important role for multipliers who are looking for well-structured, unbiased and balanced information. In Switzerland the public authorities have presented a new information platform on nanotechnology "InfoNano", launched in February 2012 (www.infonano.ch). For teachers and students there is the "Swiss Nano-Cube" www.swissnanocube.ch platform which is supported by Swiss Federal Offices.

Expert Knowledge for Political Decision Making

Maya Graf (MP and Vice president of the Swiss National Council; Greens, BL) highlighted in her presentation the developments on the regulatory level in Switzerland and beyond and discussed the role of scientific data for the political decision-making process. In Switzerland and in other European countries the expert know-how comes into the legislative process through the work of commission. The politicians need data from the area of science and technology as well as ethical, legal and social (ELSA) aspects of nanotechnology. In the political decision-making process the information has to be transformed and simplified to a certain extent. As nanotechnology is an enabling technology it has an extremely wide range of application, reaching industrial as well as consumer products. It is therefore very important to differentiate in communication. As far as nanotechnology in consumer products is concerned many consumer organizations are calling for more transparency and labeling; especially in the area of body-near applications (e. g. food, cosmetics). Maya Graf considers a declaration of nanomaterials in such products as compulsory. The conference ended with the announcement of the 7th international Nano Authorities Dialogue which will take place in Vienna in spring 2013.

Box: The Nano-Authorities Dialogue

The Nano Authorities Dialogue is an international platform for government officials, industry representatives and associations of Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein and Switzerland. The platform aims to foster informal cross-border dialogue and exchange of experiences on current issues about nanotechnologies. The platform is being organized and moderated by the Innovation Society, St.Gallen since 2008 on behalf of the respective host authorities.



Picture: Dr. Gérard Poffet, Vicepresident of the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN)

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