

Position on the Harmonized classification and Labelling for Cobalt Metal

EuRIC is concerned by the potential socio-economic impacts of the reclassification of Cobalt metal as:

- ☒ Mutagenic category 2 (H341)
- ☒ Reprotoxic category 1B (H360F)

And particularly:

- ☒ Carcinogenic category 1B H350 (all routes of exposure) **with a specific concentration limit (SCL) of 0.01%**

The derived Specific Concentration Level (SCL) of 0.01% for Cobalt metal will cause serious and long-term harm to the EU's metal recycling industries, as a majority of steel scrap contains Cobalt over 0.01 % (source: EUROFER) and hamper the transition to a more circular economy without any human health or environmental benefits.

EuRIC, the European Recycling Industries' Confederation, is substantially concerned by the proposal made by the Netherlands for harmonized classification of Cobalt metal. The proposal as it stands will significantly disrupt the value chain for steel, be it stainless or carbon steel, as well as for specialty alloys and will have a very negative impact on their recycling.

Cobalt's indispensable uses and cobalt presence as a trace element.

Cobalt metal is a naturally occurring element in several metal ores used to manufacture steel from primary materials. Cobalt is present at concentration levels above the proposed 0,01% SCL for carcinogenicity in almost all steel alloys.

In addition, Cobalt is critical to the properties and functionalities of many steel alloys used in a wealth of applications (medical in for example prosthetic devices, aerospace, energy, everyday life products, etc.).

As a result, the vast majority of discarded products made of or containing steel, stainless steel or specialty alloys contain Cobalt above the proposed 0,01% SCL.

Substantially negative impacts on recycling resulting from the proposed harmonized classification of cobalt metal

EuRIC is concerned that this overly conservative approach taken in the classification proposal will have disproportionate economic impacts for the recycling industry in particular.

In their daily practice, recyclers do not process pure Cobalt metal but discarded metals and alloys such as stainless steel, which contain a certain percentage of Cobalt as a trace element. Since Cobalt is present in steel, stainless steel or specialty alloys, it is consequently present in steel, stainless steel or specialty alloys end-of-life scrap processed by the recycling industry.

Given its intrinsic value and properties, steel scrap is among the oldest and largest (in volume) secondary material processed and recycled by the recycling industry in Europe and beyond.

A number of facilities across Europe collect and process mostly steel scrap. In addition, steel often accounts for more than 50%¹ of the output of recycling facilities processing end-of-life vehicles (ELVs) and electronic equipment (WEEE). The recycling industry collects and processes steel scrap according to industry specifications and/or EU end-of-waste (EoW) criteria which is used then to manufacture new steel and metal alloys, hence closing the circle of the circular economy.

Should the reclassification of Cobalt metal as Carc 1B with a SCL of 0.01% trigger on the short or longer term a reclassification of steel, stainless or alloys' scrap as hazardous waste, this would substantially hamper steel scrap recycling. Recycling facilities, many of them SMEs, collecting and processing steel scrap throughout Europe, do not hold permits allowing to treat hazardous waste. The reclassification of steel alloys as hazardous would mean that those facilities would simply cease to be permitted to treat steel scrap and re-introduce it into the (circular) economy to make new steel. All this without any significant improvement of the protection of the environment or human health, since stainless steel originates from products used on a large scale in domestic equipment and is permitted for example in toys, medical devices or food contact products.

Adverse environmental effects resulting from the proposed harmonized classification of cobalt metal.

Beyond the fact that hampering steel recycling would make it impossible for a number of industries (cars, electronics, etc.) to meet recycling targets set by European legislation, a reclassification as hazardous of metal scrap would be detrimental to environmental protection:

- First, neither treating metal scrap in a waste-to-energy plant nor discarding it in a landfill makes any sense given its intrinsic values and properties. Both incineration and landfilling come with far greater environmental impacts than recycling in terms of air emissions or soil pollution, and prevent material recovery which is the key enabler of a circular economy;
- Second, steel scrap recycling saves the equivalent of 57% of CO₂ emissions and 40% of energy consumption² when compared with steel produced from virgin materials. In addition, using one ton of iron or steel scrap saves the mining of 1.5 tons of iron ore³.

EuRIC calls for explicitly excluding any reclassification as hazardous waste of steel scrap as a result of the proposed harmonized classification for Cobalt metal.

Through its Member Recycling Federations from 20 EU and EFTA countries, EuRIC represents today over:

- ✓ 5,500 companies generating an aggregated annual turnover of about 95 billion €, including large companies and SMEs, involved in the recycling and trade of various resource streams;
- ✓ 300,000 local jobs which cannot be outsourced to third EU countries;
- ✓ An average of 150 million tons of waste recycled per year (paper, metals, glass and beyond).

Recyclers play a key role in a circular economy. By turning wastes into resources, recycling is the link which reintroduces recycled materials into the value chains again and again.

¹ <https://www.ctc-n.org/technologies/recycling-waste-electronic-and-electrical-equipment-weee>

² <https://www.actu-environnement.com/media/pdf/news-28012-etude-federec-bilan-recyclage-france.pdf>

³ https://www.alba.info/fileadmin/alba/pressemappe/recycling_fuer_den_klimaschutz/Recycling_fuer_den_Klimaschutz.pdf