



European Furniture Industries Confederation

# Sustainable Products Initiative

## European furniture industry insights in view of upcoming proposal for a Directive

4 November 2020

The [European furniture industries embrace EU circularity objectives](#) and are already transitioning to and promoting circular business models based on reuse, repair, refurbishment and remanufacturing of products. A more circular economy will contribute to the EU's climate neutrality objectives and to a green recovery in the context of the coronavirus crisis, increasing the competitiveness of the EU industry, affordability, the resilience of the EU and its position as a global player, reducing at the same time dependency on raw materials from third countries and creating jobs.

The European Furniture Industries Confederation (EFIC) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the inception impact assessment of the upcoming Sustainable Products Initiative. Main considerations below and 20 argumentation points in the pages to follow:

**A) Need for harmonised circular economy rules at EU level, the involvement of standardisation bodies and harmonised implementation of rules in the EU and globally**

Harmonised circular economy rules at EU level are key for strengthening the Internal Market. Initiatives of individual Member States should be limited in favour of common EU rules. We call on the European Commission to take a holistic approach and ensure the creation of a harmonised regulatory framework with no contradictions between all existing and upcoming initiatives. Standardisation bodies and the work carried out within their remits must be considered in the process. Harmonised implementation of EU rules is necessary, too, to ensure a level playing field. In this context, market surveillance should be strengthened.

**B) The complexity of furniture should be considered when widening the scope of the Ecodesign Directive and assessing the mix of complementary legislative measures & industry and standardisation bodies should be involved in the process.**

The European furniture industry is ready to provide sector specific expertise and to actively engage with the European Commission in the initiative and the forthcoming legislative proposal. When considering the development of sustainability and circular design principles for furniture via the Ecodesign Directive and upcoming complementary measures, we urge the European Commission to consider the complexity of furniture products. Circular design principles will not work for all products in the same way. When widening the scope of the Ecodesign Directive to non-energy related products, the purpose of this initiative must be clarified. Industry and standardisation bodies must be consulted in the process, as standardisation work on circularity for furniture is ongoing and many industry players have already integrated circular design in their practices. Ecodesign initiatives must also tackle the contradiction between the goal to having toxic free products and circularity objectives.

**C) Digital product passports, if designed correctly, have a large potential to channel information among stakeholders. Information to consumers should be provided by various means and green claims should be voluntary.**

The announced introduction of electronic product passports, if designed correctly, could support the purpose of providing relevant information to consumers and has the potential to channel information among stakeholders and throughout the value chains, promoting remanufacturing and recycling. Information to consumers should be provided by various means. Green claims should be voluntary. If claims are used, a well-established, standardised and robust methodology should be used.



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## **A) Harmonised circular economy rules at EU level, involvement of standardisation bodies and harmonised implementation of rules in the EU and globally**

1. Sustainability principles for products and services are only partially addressed in EU legislation. The sustainable products initiative has the potential to expand requirements under EU legislation, when appropriate, and to contribute to a more complete and harmonised framework at EU level. With the upcoming initiative we see an opportunity for strengthening the internal market, avoiding that national initiatives address the same issue in different ways. It is important that requirements at EU level are streamlined, clear and detailed enough to avoid misaligned implementation of EU rules at national level. One example of concern in this context is the anti-waste legislation adopted by France on 10 February 2020<sup>1</sup>. The legislation has the potential to fragment the Single Market with, for instance, the reinforcement of the TRIMAN sorting logo, a unique marking for France which would restrict the free movement of goods. EFIC reacted to the draft decree reinforcing the use of the TRIMAN logo<sup>2</sup>. As such, it is also important that initiatives of individual Member States are limited in favour of common EU rules.
2. The European Commission should take a holistic approach when developing the sustainable products initiative and ensure that existing and forthcoming policies are considered in the process. We welcome that the initiative will be developed in close coordination with others announced in the Green Deal and Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP), such as those to empower consumers to the green transition and to substantiate green claims or the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability. It is important that the exact scope and limit of each initiative is clarified, as there is a risk that the same goal may be pursued with different legal tools at the same time, creating an uncertain and possibly contradictory regulatory framework.
3. Speeding up the transition to a circular economy is important. Nonetheless, to ensure harmonisation and an effective implementation, EU legislation must provide clear definitions for many parameters such as 'repairability', 'reuse', 'recyclability' and others. Definitions set at EU level will allow all stakeholders to operate under the same understanding and to provide harmonised and measurable information to consumers. Setting definitions cannot be left at the discretion of Member States or economic operators, as this may hamper circularity objectives and the principles of the Single Market.
4. EU ambitions on circularity address needs that go beyond borders and have the potential to lead by example at international level. To ensure that the EU future regulatory framework meets its full potential, we urge EU policymakers to take a long-term view to ensure that requirements can be ambitiously and efficiently replicated in other parts of the globe. To this end, we see a need for international cooperation, both at political, legal, and technical level (e.g. standardisation activities). There are ongoing initiatives at international level concerning circular economy within ISO/TC 323, but also at European level (related to furniture, a taskforce on circular economy has been created in CEN TC 207). Here, the European Commission must also create a financial framework that enables European interests to be adequately represented at international standardization level.
5. Rules must be enforceable and controllable by market surveillance authorities. It is essential that third country producers importing products in the EU abide by all upcoming EU rules related to circularity (including sustainable product design), but also REACH and CLP. The right enforcement tools must be in place and used to make sure that compliance with regulations can be properly monitored.

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<sup>1</sup> [Link to French government website](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Link to EFIC comments concerning draft decree on TRIMAN logo](#)



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## **B) Widening the scope of the Ecodesign Directive and complementary legislative measures & involvement of the industry and standardisation bodies in the process**

6. Policy tools to address sustainability criteria of furniture are welcome, nevertheless, developing legislation concerning circular design criteria for furniture is a completely new concept, therefore it should be addressed with a step-by-step approach. It is key that industry is involved in the creation of new legislation concerning product sustainability requirements, to provide sector-based expertise and research findings. EFIC and its experts are available for this purpose.
7. When considering the different combinations of policy options to address sustainability aspects of products and services via the sustainable products initiative and in view of the upcoming impact assessment study, the complexity of furniture should be considered. From a “circularity” point of view, the wide range of products that are considered ‘furniture’ (seating, tables, storage units including kitchen/bathroom-fittings, reclining furniture/mattresses, bunk beds/high beds for both domestic and non-domestic markets) and the diverse materials used in their production (e.g. wood, plastics, textile, steel, glass, composites, foam) makes this a complex area to address.
8. As a result, Ecodesign/circular design criteria will not work for all products the same way. The furniture range is very differentiated and must be assessed against product-applicable design principles that will create circular products. Developing reasonable criteria for spare parts is also important, but requirements should be established carefully to avoid large storage of spare parts. Care must also be exercised when setting requirements for maximum delivery times for spare parts, given the complex supply chain in the furniture industries.
9. Consequently, only general principles for Ecodesign/circular design as part of ‘effect goals’<sup>3</sup> should be established at EU level. The technical solutions should be entrusted to the industry in collaboration with the academia. It must also be considered that the implementation of Ecodesign/circular design principles may be difficult due to the lack of tenders, therefore the principles should not drive the market extensively and must not be too aggressive. In this context, Green Public Procurement with standardised requirements is an important tool that can drive Ecodesign/circular design principles and demand circular solutions. The intention of setting minimum green public procurement criteria is welcome, however, the criteria must be defined and tested together with the industry and CEN before they are widely applicable.
10. Ecodesign/circular design criteria must also take industrial symbiosis into account to facilitate collaboration between different branches of industry. In addition to this, it is important that Ecodesign rules tackle the conflict between toxic free products and circularity. A risk-based approach should be taken to this end.
11. EFIC is following closely standardisation and industry initiatives on circular design. When developing circular design criteria, the industry and standardisation bodies should be consulted throughout the process. As an example, CEN TC 207 on Furniture is currently identifying circular economy standardisation needs to support the industry. In more general terms, work on circular economy is ongoing at ISO level within ISO / TC 323, too. Many industry players are already successfully integrating circular design principles and existing business expertise should be used when defining circular design rules for furniture<sup>4</sup>.
12. In this context, it is also important that the purpose of widening the scope of the Ecodesign Directive to non-energy related products is clarified. In the case of energy-related products, the purpose of Ecodesign principles is to increase energy efficiency. It is important to specify what the

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<sup>3</sup> Examples: reduced greenhouse gas emissions, more efficient resource utilization and reduced waste generation

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.efic.eu/best-practices>



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objective will be for non-energy related products. It is also important that the remit of each piece of legislation is clearly defined, to avoid that the same aspects are regulated by several pieces of legislation, and that a clarification is provided on how the introduction of principles for Ecodesign can harmonise and reinforce circular design principles. The widened Ecodesign Directive should promote circular design.

13. When addressing materials as part of the upcoming sustainable products initiative, it needs to be considered that material choice may be limited in some cases, as substitutions do not always exist or there could be availability or cost implications. Further research is needed to deepen the understanding around materials and their impact. Also, when separability principles are applied, increased costs are reported, too, unless corresponding cost-neutral circular alternatives are developed through accompanying funded research.
14. When addressing the use of chemicals as part of the upcoming products initiative, it must be considered that one of the backbones of a circular economy is keeping materials and products in the loop for as long as possible. This means that secondary raw materials must be safe. For secondary materials to be safe, substances of concern must be minimised and efficiently tracked in the supply chain. Two approaches may be needed in this context: one for existing products, ensuring an efficient control of substances (the SCIP database could be part of the solution, as well as a chemical risk assessment), and another for tomorrow's products. For tomorrow's products, the solution is a more circular design, minimising the presence of substances of concern from the production phase. Clear rules are needed under the upcoming sustainable products initiative (in concertation with the European Chemicals Agency) to identify substances that may be used during production, including evaluating the possibility to formulate a list of chemicals which undermine recyclability with the goal of forbidding their use in the production phase – when possible – or at least to limit concentrations to adequate levels. In this context, it is important to remember, firstly, that for some substances there are no alternatives on the market that can be used with the same purpose/functionality/result and, secondly, that the use of recyclates requires a gradual adaptation of limit values of pollutants, as the materials used come from times when these pollutants were subject to other limits.
15. Related to point 14, one example of chemicals that need to be addressed via the upcoming sustainable products initiative is unwanted chemical flame retardants, used by furniture or textile manufacturers to comply with outdated flammability standards in European countries (both for domestic and non-domestic furniture). The Alliance for Flame Retardant Free Furniture launched by EFIC advocates for EU-wide action against these chemicals and for a harmonisation of flammability requirements to a level where toxic flame retardants are not needed. These substances have no proven fire safety benefit. However, there is a large base of evidence on their harmful effects on human health, increased fire toxicity, the environment and the circular economy.<sup>5 6</sup>
16. Concerning future requirements to address social aspects throughout the product lifecycle as part of sustainability principles, we question whether this is the right framework to address the issue. In any case, in many European countries employment cost adjustments will be needed (i.e. labour tax). In this sense the efforts to avoid market fragmentation and unfair competition are essential.
17. Concerning future measures to ban the destruction of unsold durable goods, the requirements should not hamper remanufacturing or recycling possibilities and the EU waste hierarchy should prevail. Also, potential requirements must be formulated in a way that property rights legislation is not infringed. Clear definitions may be needed, too, for example for the term 'destruction'.

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<sup>5</sup> [Alliance for Flame Retardant Free Furniture website](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Alliance for Flame Retardant Free Furniture position paper 15 April 2020](#)



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### **C) Disclosure of information to market actors along value chains in the form of a digital product passport & mandatory sustainability labelling**

18. It is important that information to consumers must not be provided on every furniture component. Information should be provided in various ways to reflect consumers' needs. A combination between online information, information in stores and labelling is optimal, depending on the circumstance and specific needs. Information to consumers could be provided in their own language online and in stores, while symbols should preferably be used in packaging, to minimise trade barriers and administrative burdens.
19. The announced introduction of electronic product passports could support the purpose of providing relevant information to consumers and the digital component will certainly bring benefits. Product passports also have the potential to channel information between stakeholders in the value chains and if they are designed properly (based on existing product legislation such as REACH, RoHS and applicable industry standards in Europe) they can lead to the acceleration of the green transition and facilitation of circular business models. It is important to involve standardisation bodies and use standardised data based on global standards to ensure that the tools are reliable and enable a correct comparison of products. Standardised digital information will also enable mutual identification of different systems and global trade and strengthen the competitiveness of European industries. The purpose and sustainability challenges of these tools should be defined by policymakers to ensure that the tools have the desired effect. Product passports should have a pragmatic approach and only provide information that is important for the intended receiver (B2B or B2C). Information provided via the passports may need to differ depending on specific needs and may have more than one purpose. The information should be limited to what is relevant and necessary for a specific purpose. It is important to find the right level of detail to be provided, given the long and complex value chains, to ensure that product passports do not bring additional administrative burdens. The tools must be implemented throughout the EU and achieve international approval.
20. Concerning linking the sustainable product initiative with the Product and Organisation Footprint methods, we believe that tools to substantiate green claims should remain voluntary, as well as the decision whether to make a green claim or not. However, if companies decide to use such tools, a certain recognised methodology should be followed (such as well-established ISO 14024 type 1 ecolabels), to ensure that the data provided are comparable and to increase trust in claims. While it is important to establish an EU-wide methodology to quantify environmental impacts of products, the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) method has proven to be an imperfect tool to substantiate environmental claims and to assess the quality of furniture products, as it is unfit for customer-facing communication and presents a number of complexities. The PEF is also difficult to apply in practice as the methodology is not yet fully adopted. The PEF is far from ready to be used and the robustness of the tool must be measured before integrating it further into EU policies.

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*EFIC is the European Furniture Industries Confederation, representing over 70% of the total turnover of the European Furniture Industries, a sector employing 1 million people in about 120.000 enterprises across the EU and generating a turnover of 96 billion Euros. The EFIC membership is composed of 16 national federations and one individual company member: <https://www.efic.eu/about-our-members>*

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