

ANALYSIS OF THE NORDIC SWAN ECOLABEL'S POSITION ON PVC IN FLOOR COVERINGS

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In 2023 it was decided by the highest decision board in the Nordic Swan not to include PVC flooring nor PVC as a material in the product group definition of the revised criteria for floor coverings and flooring underlays. The decision was taken despite the explicit acknowledgement of the positive environmental development of PVC in Europe during the last +20 years.

In this memo, we aim to critically examine the considerations behind the Swan's decision not to allow vinyl floors to be eco-labeled.

We attempt to do this by basing our approach on [the principles](#) that the board itself states are foundational for their decision on whether a given product can receive the environmental label or not.

Key advancements by the PVC industry according to the Nordic Swan

Chlorine production:

Europe phased out asbestos and mercury diaphragms.
Implemented energy-efficient membrane cell technology.
Used perfluoro-compounds for membranes, showing minimal PFAS release.

Emission control:

Significant decrease in organochlorine emissions.
ECVM's 2019 charter set emission limits; 100% compliance by 2022.

Safer additives:

Phased out harmful phthalates and lead/cadmium stabilisers.
Adopted safer alternatives, improving environmental safety of PVC products.

Sustainable production:

Replaced fossil feedstock with renewable waste/residues.
Introduced bio-attributed PVC, reducing CO2 emissions by over 90%.

Waste management:

The majority of PVC waste is energetically recovered or recycled in Europe.
Emphasis on recycling challenges for PVC floors; industry moving towards circular solutions.

In addition to the environmental progress of PVC in the last decades, it should also be mentioned that third-parties such as Rambøll Denmark has [found](#) that PVC flooring have unique functional properties such as durability, chemical resistance and ability to be fully sealed. Replacing PVC with other materials may be regarded as regretful substitution.

The Swan prioritises reputation over science

As it can be seen in annex 1 of this note it can be regarded as highly noteworthy that all the Scandinavian countries express concern about whether the Swan Label's reputation will suffer if PVC products now can be environmentally labeled.

In the responses provided by the Scandinavian countries, it appears that the Swan values reputation more than objective professional environmental assessment when drafting an environmental label criterion.

The question, of course, is whether it's fair for a material to be excluded from receiving an environmental label simply because it has a bad reputation. What speaks in favor of giving reputation such significance, and what speaks against it?

There are arguments for basing environmental labeling on actual conditions rather than reputation:

Objectivity: Decisions on environmental labeling should be based on scientific and factual criteria, rather than public opinion.

Updated information: People may have outdated perceptions of a product based on past issues. If a product has indeed been improved, it deserves to be recognized for these improvements. Here, PVC is a prime example.

Promotion of innovation: By rewarding companies for actual improvements, it encourages continued innovations in sustainability and environmental protection. The possibility for PVC flooring and other products to be eco-labeled could animate manufacturers to develop more sustainable products.

However, there are also arguments against for considering reputation as a factor in environmental labeling:

Credibility: For an environmental label to be effective, it must be credible in the eyes of the public. If a product with a poor reputation receives an environmental label, it could undermine the label's credibility.

Communication: It can be challenging to communicate the nuanced reasons why a product with a bad reputation is now considered environmentally friendly. This can lead to confusion or mistrust among consumers.

While there seem to be compelling arguments for considering reputation in the context of eco-labeling, the question is, of course, whether it's legitimate based on the principles upon which the Swan is founded.

Using reputation as argument for exclusion is against the Nordic Swan's own principles

[See the guiding principles.](#)

Potential conflict with the ISO standard for ecolabels

The Nordic Swan is a type 1 ecolabel according to the ISO 14024:2018 standard, which establishes principles and procedures for third-party environmental labeling. As the standard for environmental labeling prescribes that criteria should be based on scientific data and evidence, and not subjective opinions or biases, using reputation as an argument against accepting PVC may conflict with the ISO 14024.

No basis for invoking The Precautionary Principle

The Nordic Swan adheres to [The Precautionary Principle](#) that traditionally is used in the face of environmental or health risks amid scientific uncertainty. While it's important to protect the reputation of an eco-label like the Nordic Swan, decisions made solely based on reputational concerns should be carefully weighed. As the Nordic Swan acknowledges the sustainable development of PVC in Europe, there is no basis for invoking this principle.

Biased application of The Substitution Principle

The Nordic Swan adheres to [The Substitution Principle](#) which aims to minimize environmental harm by assessing substitution opportunities for harmful substances. Excluding PVC flooring due to reputation, while allowing other products such as [laminat flooring](#) that contains the [known carcinogen formaldehyde that may offgas](#) and [melamine which Germany proposes to classify as SVHC under REACH](#) might be seen as a biased application of The Substitution Principle.

Excluding PVC results in Environmental Burden Shifting

The Nordic Swan wants to avoid [Environmental Burden Shifting](#), which refers to the intentional transfer of environmental impact from one area or stage to another, rather than genuinely reducing it. As noted above, flooring materials approved by Nordic Swan may have their environmental concerns. It is crucial to juxtapose these with PVC flooring's impacts to genuinely minimize environmental burdens without unintentionally shifting them elsewhere. Again, The Nordic Swan is inconsistent.

Excluding PVC due to bad reputation may violate EU's single market principles

The Nordic Swan Ecolabel is a voluntary certification, and its exclusion of products, such as PVC flooring, due to environmental or health concerns doesn't directly impede the EU's single market rules. However, if the exclusion criteria are perceived as arbitrary or discriminatory, it could be challenged under EU single market principles, even though the label itself is not a mandatory regulatory barrier.

The Swan mistakenly regards the NGOs as bearers of truth when it comes to PVC

It is also worth noting that the Nordic Swan places significant emphasis on the opinions of green organizations regarding PVC. This is deeply problematic considering that NGOs have limited insight into today's PVC issues. For instance, the umbrella NGO European Environmental Bureau [claims](#) that PVC is the least recyclable plastic. This is a glaring misinformation.

For documentation, see for instance PVCMed Alliance's paper [*Why PVC Should Remain the Preferred Material in Healthcare and Elsewhere.*](#)

Further, the Nordic Swan cherry-picks NGO opinions when they fit into their own agenda. For instance, as noted above, laminate flooring containing melamine can be eco-labeled despite the fact that an influential NGO [calls](#) for melamine to be added to REACH's "blacklist of harmful chemicals."

Annex 1: Summary of the countries' decision making process

Below, in brief, are the arguments presented by the various Nordic countries:

<p>SWEDEN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Echa's preliminary study on PVC will be completed in May/June; the Ecolabeling will retrieve the results. • The majority support Ecolabeling if strict requirements are met. • Ecolabeling should promote the best products in the category and set uniform requirements for all floor types. • Only legal, established products should be labeled. • Labeling vinyl floors might send the wrong signals; communication challenges exist. • Coordination with Chemsec is necessary. • Recycled PVC might contain harmful substances, especially when mixed with new PVC. • Complete traceability in the supply chain is crucial but challenging. • The reason for Sweden's opposition to the Swan's decision: The Swan's own experts recommend, based on an extensive survey, that vinyl floors be included, and Sweden believes one should trust these experts. 	<p>DENMARK</p> <p>Generally, the board was deeply concerned that it would damage the credibility of the Swan Label for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility is challenged when consumers are advised in many other places to avoid soft PVC; it's hard to convincingly argue that PVC floors are good when they're Swan-labeled. • NGOs in the EU are pushing to ban PVC. • It's also undesirable to Swan label floors where there's a risk of PFAS emissions during production, which occurs with the proposed alternative technology (membrane cell technology). • There's a risk that we are unaware of the alternative softeners that replace phthalates. • Currently, there's a high risk that PVC floors will end up in landfills in DK. • It's uncertain how take-back systems will be active in 20-30 years when the PVC floor is worn out.
<p>FINLAND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finland is debating whether to include PVC/vinyl products, which meet strict requirements, in the flooring criteria. PVC has previously been banned in Swan-labelled products due to environmental concerns. 	<p>ICELAND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sweden suggests the inclusion of PVC, which would change the approach of the Nordic Swan label. • PVC has generally been limited in the Nordic Swan label's criteria with a few exceptions.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECHA is investigating the environmental impact of PVC; the report has not been published yet. • If PVC is considered favorably, it will be included in the flooring criteria for consultation. • There are doubts about PVC's value to the environment and the Swan label, as well as concerns about the recycling of PVC and waste management. • The board is skeptical and does not support the proposal to include PVC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECHA's report on PVC's environmental impact has not yet been published. • A decision on PVC will affect all the Nordic Swan label's criteria. • Pro PVC: Market opportunities, consumer guidance, strict requirements, and circular economy. • Against PVC: Harmful production, environmental hazards from combustion, harmful additives, and complex waste management in Iceland. • The council's decision: Not currently relevant to include PVC in the criteria, especially due to concerns related to the circular economy and awaiting ECHA's report.
<p>NORWAY</p> <p>Following an in-depth debate on environmental and reputation aspects, the Norwegian committee decided to exclude PVC from the consultation proposal for flooring.</p>	