

Small European importers and traders and small Chinese manufacturers were accused of being the weakest link in the product safety chain in a report by independent experts released by the European Commission in June 2008.

The five-month analysis entitled "*Evaluating Business Safety Measures in the Toy Supply Chain*" was carried out at the initiative of the European Commission, after a series of high profile recalls in 2007. The main gaps in small businesses capabilities included: a lack of in-depth knowledge of the applicable legislation and standards, a lower number of dedicated personnel, and weaker systems of quality management and supplier control.

All along the supply chain technical files were found to be of poor quality or absent altogether despite being a compliance requirement. Other common problems were with age grading of toys and poor recall management procedures.

Although the project focused on the toy sector, several of the findings will be pertinent to other product groups as well. The main conclusion of the evaluation was that product safety cannot be guaranteed by final product testing alone, but has to be embedded in the entire product development and production process. Adopting and maintaining a strong quality and safety culture is a critical element in ensuring continuous attention to product safety issues.

For example, the research found that, for many of the smaller operators, the Chinese government's export controls, when undertaken, were the only real independent test of the product's safety before being placed on the EU market. Furthermore, given the importance of the US market, Chinese producers tend to focus on US regulations and standards, making it more difficult to fully understand the European legislative framework.

Another problem found was that some enforcement authorities were perceived to lack expertise in toy safety, to the detriment of a level playing field for businesses. The report presents over 50 recommendations to strengthen the current system for ensuring toy safety, targeting all key actors in the supply chain.

For further information visit: http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/citizen/my_safety/index_en.htm