Changing The Face Of Hazardous Products: Aligning WHMIS with the GHS in Canada

Thursday, July 9, 2015


The new legislation brings Canada’s hazardous products labelling requirements in line with the international standardized hazardous products labelling system, the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS). GHS was created by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and at the time of writing this article, GHS has been implemented in 70 countries. The version of the GHS referred to in the Regulations is the fifth revised version although the sixth revised version is anticipated this year.

Changes to WHMIS

The HPA’s amendments and the new Regulations implement changes to Canada’s Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) to align it with the GHS. The changes to WHMIS are being rolled out under a multi-year transition plan ending on December 1, 2018.

The major changes to WHMIS include: 1) new hazard classes within the physical and health hazard categories; 2) standardization of supplier labels; and 3) the implementation of Safety Data Sheets. The three areas of major change are discussed in more detail below.

New Hazard Classes

GHS classifies hazards in three categories: physical hazards; health hazards; and environmental hazards. Only the physical hazards and health hazards categories are included in the Canadian regime. The Federal government has stated that it decided not to include the environmental hazard category because the aim of the WHMIS regime is focused on protecting health and safety in the workplace. The physical hazards category now includes the following additional hazards classes: combustible dusts; simple asphyxiants; pyrophoric gases; and physical hazards not otherwise classified. The health hazards category now includes biohazardous, infectious materials and health hazards not otherwise classified.

Standardization of Supplier Labels

The GHS supplier label system implemented by the HPA and Regulations will standardize the labelling system for hazardous products among signatory states to the GHS. WHMIS labels will continue to require bilingual labelling, product identifiers, supplier identifiers, and pictograms. Instead of risk phrases, which were a labelling requirement under the former WHMIS regime, the new WHMIS regime will require hazard statements. The new WHMIS regime will also require precautionary statements instead of precautionary measures. First aid statements will no longer be a separate requirement as they will be included within precautionary statements. And finally, signal words (e.g. “Danger”) are required under the new WHMIS regime.
Safety Data Sheets

The new WHMIS regime mandates the use of Safety Data Sheets (SDS) instead of the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS), which were required under the former WHMIS regime. SDS are required to include 16 sections, as per Part 4 of the Regulations, titled: identification; hazard identification; composition/information on ingredients; first-aid measures; fire-fighting measures; accidental release measures; handling and storage; exposure controls/personal protection; physical and chemical properties; stability and reactivity; toxicological information; ecological information; disposal considerations; transport information; regulatory information; and other information.

Manufacturers, importers, distributors, employers, and individuals working with hazardous products should become familiar with the new supplier labelling system and SDS format implemented by GHS. Those working with chemicals and particulate matter should also consider whether substances they use are now considered hazardous products under the new hazard classes.

Although the amended HPA and new Regulations came into force on February 11, 2015, compliance with the new WHMIS regime is not yet mandatory. The transition will be carried out in three phases, with the first phase ending in June 2017. During the first phase of the transition, suppliers and employers may comply with either the former or the new WHMIS regime. Phase two will begin in June 2017, at which point mandatory compliance with the new regime will be required for industry participants at the top of the supply chain (manufacturers and importers). Between June 2017 and December 2018, mandatory compliance with the new regime will move from the top of the supply chain to the bottom.\(^1\)

By the time the third phase of implementation begins in December 2018, all participants in the hazardous products industry must be in full compliance with the new WHMIS regime.


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