



Product footprinting: category rules need harmonising

There is a need for greater harmonisation of the methods used to estimate the environmental impact of products, otherwise known as product category rules (PCRs). A new study has reviewed the development of PCRs and provided recommendations for better alignment.

There is increasing demand for information on the products' environmental life cycle performance, such as the carbon footprint. This information can be provided using a method called life cycle assessment or LCA. Meaningful comparisons between products require common rules for the LCA. PCRs provide essential guidance on how lifecycle environmental impacts should be estimated and reported for products within a category. For example, they help define the boundaries between different life cycle stages (such as production, use, and end-of-life) and give guidance on the data sources and units to be used in making estimates. They may also set rules for how a product's environmental impact is communicated.

As the number of PCRs grows, challenges have arisen for the harmonisation of these vital tools. There is no global organisation or pre-defined structure for PCR systems and, as such, there is potential for conflicts between data sources and calculation rules.

The study focused on major, well-established and government-initiated labelling programmes to gain insight into the possible challenges for harmonisation. It estimated that there are over 300 PCRs that have been published or are in formal development.

PCRs may differ in the actual definition of a product category. The definition generally focuses on function, but there may be two product types fulfilling the same function but with different life cycles. For example, powdered and liquid detergents have different supply chains. In this case, different PCRs could either place powdered and liquid detergent into the same category or separate them. To overcome this problem, the study suggests using a hierarchically structured classification system that clearly maps products to categories, such as the United Nations' Standard Product and Services Code (UNSPSC)¹.

A further challenge is differences in data that PCRs may use. As a solution, the study recommends developing national and international data on key processes relevant to all supply chains, such as resource extraction, product use and end-of-life phases. The geographic scope of PCRs can also present an issue in terms of whether it is possible to establish global PCRs or whether they should exist at a regional or national level. The study recommends creating global PCRs that allow for regional differences in technology, supply chains and available data.

Finally, PCRs are used for different types of communication. For example, PCRs are used for both product carbon footprints and environmental product declarations, which provide different information. The study suggests it is unnecessary to develop different PCRs for different forms of communication, and there should be a drive to ensure alignment.

To meet these challenges and ensure the successful adoption of PCRs, the study recommends drawing on multi-stakeholder input to establish life cycle data alongside a high level of transparency in the development PCRs. Adequate funding is also needed to sustain mechanisms that promote alignment, such as the Product Category Rule Round Table².

1. See: www.unspsc.org

2. Incorporated into this year's PCF World Summit: www.pcf-world-forum.org/summit/7th-pcf-world-summit/

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