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Fluorinated greenhouse gases: New EU regulations governing refrigeration and air conditioning systems

As of July 2008 maintenance, installation and servicing by certified professionals only – self-installation no longer allowed

Refrigeration and air conditioning systems can be found virtually everywhere: in hotels, factories, and private households. If the systems contain more than three kilogrammes of fluorinated greenhouse gases as their coolant, they must be checked for leakage at least once a year, pursuant to Regulation (EC) Nr. 842/2006 governing certain fluorinated greenhouse gases. In future, only certified personnel may carry out these tests as well as installation, maintenance, and recovery of coolants. The much favoured independent installation of these units containing fluorinated greenhouse gases and bought at the DIY shop will no longer be permitted. This is part of a ruling by the European Commission (EU) of 2 April 2008 laid down in Regulation (EC) Nr. 303/2008 regarding minimum requirements in the certification of companies and personnel. The federal government is currently drafting a law on chemicals and climate protection so as to comply with the EU regulations. The new German ordinance must be finalised by 4 July 2008 and has been submitted to the Federal Council for deliberation. By means of the new law Germany aims to advance Item 23 in the Integrated Energy and Climate Programme of the German Government (IKEP) pertaining to fluorinated greenhouse gases.

Fluorinated greenhouse gases, e.g. tetrafluoroethane (R 134a) or the admixture R 404A, both of which are partially fluorinated hydrocarbons (HCFC), are nowadays used as the refrigerant in most of the stationary refrigeration, air conditioning, and heat pump systems in Germany. These substances do up to several thousands of times more damage to the climate than carbon dioxide (CO₂) if they escape, and it is precisely the potential leakage of these systems that poses a big problem. In Germany alone, an annual volume of more than 2,000 tonnes of coolants harmful to the climate escape into the atmosphere.

The new EU regulations stipulate, in addition to placing a ban on the trade of products that contain fluorinated greenhouse gases such as one-component foams or new aerosols, a reduction of emissions from stationary refrigeration and air conditioning systems and heat pumps. The systems must be checked for leakage at regular intervals, with frequency depending on the size of the system. What is especially important is that the checks and all other emissions-related activities (i.e. installation, maintenance, servicing, and recovery of coolants) may only be carried out by certified personnel as of 4 July 2008. Any company that either installs, services or maintains such systems must also obtain certification. Certification is also required of personnel recovering fluorinated greenhouse gases from air conditioning systems to motor vehicles. The popular means of self-installation by the do-it-yourselfer of DIY-bought units containing fluorinated refrigerants will no longer be allowed.

All professional personnel complying with the requirements of the new EU Regulation Nr. 303/2008 can have a certificate issued to them. These certificates will likely be issued by chambers of craft, chambers of commerce and industry, or other recognised organs. Certification will be valid in all Member States of the European Union.

More information is available at <http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/produkte/fckw/index.htm>.

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