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Life in the PFAS Lane: Recent Global Trends in PFAS Regulation

Lincoln Tsang and Julie Kvedar*

In this article, the authors discuss the status of the regulation of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances across the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Over recent years, global regulation of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) has increasingly focused on restricting or phasing out non-essential uses, while permitting exemptions only for applications deemed critical to society. Notably, the European Union is advancing a comprehensive, near-total ban on over 10,000 PFAS under the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) regulation, targeting the virtual elimination of these substances.[1] This article examines recent regulatory developments across the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with particular emphasis on compliance implications for the life sciences sector. Key events in 2026—including the progression of the EU REACH proposal toward final opinion, the European Chemicals Agency's (ECHA) 60-day public consultation on the Socio-Economic Analysis Committee (SEAC) draft opinion on PFAS restrictions,[2] and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) extension of its PFAS reporting deadline to 2027[3]—underscore the urgency for companies to evaluate their product portfolios, supply chains, and regulatory exposure. This article reflects the status of global PFAS regulation as of the date of publication.

PFAS are a broad class of synthetic chemicals used to impart resistance to water, stains, grease, and heat, and are commonly referred to as "forever chemicals." They feature in a wide range of products, including non-stick cookware, food packaging, firefighting foam, stain-resistant fabrics, medical devices, and dental floss. Regulatory pressure has intensified due to PFAS' environmental persistence and bioaccumulation, alongside mounting—albeit

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varied—evidence linking PFAS exposure to health concerns such as elevated cholesterol, pregnancy-related hypertension, developmental effects, immune impacts, liver function changes, and certain cancers.[4] In response, policymakers are increasingly distinguishing between non-essential uses (where alternatives or reformulation may be feasible) and essential uses (where performance requirements, safety needs, or the absence of substitutes justify narrower, time-limited exemptions).

The commercial implications are already significant. A European Commission study of January 2026 estimates that, if current levels of PFAS pollution persist through 2050, the cost to European society could reach €440 billion, with the cost of treating polluted water alone exceeding €1 trillion.[5] For manufacturers, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) analysis of the cosmetics sector indicates that reformulating to remove intentionally added PFAS can cost approximately €391,000 for a large company and €45,000 for a small company per formulation, with timelines ranging from 6 months to 4.5 years.[6] For life sciences companies, early action may mitigate risks associated with compressed development timelines, supply chain disruption, heightened regulatory enforcement, and reputational exposure as restrictions take effect.

A growing body of authoritative research supports the move toward broader PFAS restrictions, including the OECD's February 2024 cosmetics sector report (finding few technical barriers to PFAS removal),[7] Canada's March 2025 "State of PFAS" report (aggregating bioaccumulation science),[8] the April 2024 Zurich II Statement on PFAS (cautioning against broad "essential use" exemptions),[9] and the U.S. White House Office of Science and Technology Policy's March 2023 PFAS Report (recognising potential essential-use arguments for pharmaceuticals and medical devices).[10] Additionally, a November 2023 scientific review by Dewapriya et al. confirmed that certain PFAS in cosmetics may degrade to perfluorinated carboxylic acids, which are restricted under EU REACH.[11] Collectively, these sources highlight the policy direction and the importance of sector-specific exemption analysis for life sciences companies.

European Union

The European Union is moving rapidly toward comprehensive PFAS restrictions, layering both group-based and sector-specific

measures across jurisdictions. While the overarching aim is to protect public health and the environment, practical challenges—particularly for the pharmaceutical sector—underscore the need for careful consideration of essential uses, the realities of substitution, and the potential impact on patient access and European competitiveness. Companies should use the current lead time to assess and adapt their product portfolios, supply chains, and compliance strategies in anticipation of these far-reaching changes.

The European Union continues to advance a sweeping proposed REACH restriction covering the manufacture, use, and import of more than 10,000 PFAS.[12] ECHA's Risk Assessment Committee (RAC) and SEAC have both endorsed EU-wide restrictions, subject to specific derogations.[13] RAC adopted its final opinion on 2 March 2026,[14] highlighting the persistent and hazardous nature of PFAS, their ability to contaminate groundwater and soil, cause serious health issues, and travel long distances in the environment. RAC concluded that current regulatory measures are insufficient and recommended additional risk management strategies—such as site-specific PFAS management plans, emission monitoring, supply chain communication, consumer labelling, safe use and disposal instructions, and mandatory emission reporting—to minimise PFAS emissions, particularly where derogations are granted.[15]

SEAC agreed its draft opinion on a PFAS restriction proposal on 10 March 2026,[16] supporting a broad restriction and emphasising the need for targeted derogations where alternatives are unavailable and the costs and benefits justify continued use. SEAC also recommends risk management measures for derogated uses, aligning with RAC's guidance, but notes that further evidence is needed to determine the proportionality of these measures.[17] Both committees' positions, published in late March 2026,[18] mark a significant step toward comprehensive EU-level action on PFAS, balancing environmental and health protection with socio-economic considerations.

The pharmaceutical sector, represented by the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA), has expressed deep concern regarding the opinions published by ECHA's scientific committees, which do not support derogations for PFAS in pharmaceutical uses.[19] EFPIA and its member companies share the ambition of protecting public health and the environment, but argue that the committees' opinions fail to reflect the realities of medicine development and the current availability of PFAS alternatives. The absence of clear and durable derogations for

medicines would compromise patient access to critical treatments and risk driving pharmaceutical manufacturing out of Europe. PFAS materials are essential for manufacturing processes, medicinal products, active pharmaceutical ingredients, delivery devices, and packaging used by millions of Europeans. Substituting these materials is not straightforward, requiring extensive research and development, legal, and regulatory approvals. EFPIA emphasises that, at a time when EU leaders are calling for greater competitiveness and strategic autonomy, policy decisions should fully consider the significant disruption that PFAS restrictions would cause for patients, healthcare systems, and companies operating in Europe.[20] Similarly, The MedTech Europe representing the medtech industry in Europe is lobbying for exemptions from the EU's proposed universal PFAS restrictions. While ECHA advocates for phasing out PFAS, manufacturers caution that a blanket ban could disrupt the supply of more than 100,000 essential medical devices—including catheters, implants, and surgical equipment—which depend heavily on PTFE and other fluoropolymers.[21]

ECHA's final public consultation on the SEAC-proposed PFAS restriction ran from 26 March 2026 to 25 May 2026.[22] SEAC is expected to adopt its final opinion by the end of 2026, after which the file will move to the European Commission.[23] Restrictions are not expected to begin applying for several years thereafter, but the direction of travel is already clear. Companies placing products on the EU market, particularly those with long development cycles or complex supply chains, should treat the remaining lead time as a preparation window rather than a reason to defer action.

The European Union has also tightened sector-specific controls, including an EU-wide restriction on PFAS in firefighting foam (entered into force in October 2025, with phased restrictions and derogations),[24] food-packaging PFAS thresholds (effective 12 August 2026),[25] and Drinking Water Directive limits on PFAS in drinking water (effective 12 January 2026).[26] EU Directive 2026/805, which entered into force on 11 May 2026, adds PFAS to the lists of surface water and groundwater pollutants, and member states must transpose those amendments into national law by 22 December 2027.[27] This layering of group-based and sector-specific measures increases the compliance burden for businesses, which may be affected not only by product restrictions but also by environmental monitoring, remediation, and disclosure obligations.

Member state action is accelerating alongside EU-wide measures. France's February 2025 law bans PFAS in cosmetics and specified textiles from January 2026, with broader textile bans to follow beginning in 2030.[28] The Netherlands has added PFAS to its "Substances of Very High Concern" list, triggering emission-reduction planning obligations. These national initiatives reinforce the broader EU trajectory and may create earlier or more granular compliance obligations even before the proposed EU REACH restriction takes effect.

United Kingdom

The UK's regulatory approach to PFAS has been precautionary and collaborative, prioritising expanded environmental monitoring and targeted statutory reforms over immediate blanket bans. The UK PFAS Plan, published by the UK Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs on 3 February 2026,[29] includes a significant increase in surveillance efforts, such as increased water, soil, and coastal wildlife testing to identify pollution hotspots.[30] The government is currently consulting on the introduction of strict, statutory limits for PFAS in drinking water, with the Drinking Water Inspectorate presently applying a precautionary, non-statutory guidance limit of 0.1 micrograms per litre.[31] The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) oversees existing restrictions under UK REACH, with bans already in place for certain legacy chemicals such as perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA).[32] Looking ahead, the United Kingdom has indicated intent to reform its REACH framework by 2028 to align more closely with the European Union, aiming to phase out PFAS in everyday consumer products while maintaining exemptions for essential industries.[33]

The UK's approach seeks to balance precaution, industry collaboration, and evidence-based policy development. However, practical challenges of substitution and criticism from environmental groups highlight ongoing tensions between the need for robust public health protections and the realities of industrial innovation and supply chain management. Industry bodies have cautioned against sweeping, immediate bans, citing the lack of safe, viable alternatives in specialised sectors such as hydrogen production and medical devices, and arguing that a measured transition is necessary to avoid disrupting critical supply chains and innovation.[34]

In contrast, environmental groups and parliamentary committees have criticised the government's approach, contending that it relies too heavily on further monitoring and voluntary industry measures rather than implementing aggressive, preventative bans on non-essential PFAS, potentially delaying meaningful action and prolonging exposure risks.[35]

To date, the United Kingdom has taken a more measured approach than the European Union, with only two PFAS substances—PFOA and perfluorinated silane—currently restricted under UK REACH. The HSE's 2023 Regulatory Management Options Analysis adopted a narrower definition of PFAS than the EU's proposed universal restriction, excluding certain fluoropolymers and sectors such as medical devices, transport, and cosmetics.[36] For life sciences companies, this narrower scope may offer greater near-term flexibility in the United Kingdom compared to the European Union, but it should not be assumed to provide long-term regulatory certainty, as future reforms could broaden restrictions. Recent UK actions signal a gradual tightening of the regulatory framework, including the ban on PFOA-based firefighting foams (effective 4 July 2025), an HSE public consultation on broader PFAS restrictions in firefighting foams (closed in February 2026),[37] and the publication of the UK's first national PFAS action plan in February 2026.[38] While the UK's pace remains more cautious than the EU's, companies operating across both markets should anticipate partial convergence over time and remain alert to differences in scope, timing, and exemptions. Companies should closely monitor regulatory developments and prepare for increasing compliance obligations as the United Kingdom moves toward a more comprehensive PFAS framework.

United States

In the United States, PFAS regulation is developing on two tracks: federal agencies are reassessing the scope and timing of certain requirements, while states continue to advance aggressive product restrictions. At the federal level, the Food and Drug Administration published its report on PFAS in cosmetics on 29 December 2025, as required by the Modernization of Cosmetics Regulation Act of 2022 (MoCRA).[39] The report identified 51 PFAS used in 1,744 cosmetic formulations but did not reach definitive

safety conclusions, instead finding that toxicological data for most PFAS are "incomplete or unavailable" and underscoring continued uncertainty about consumer safety.[40] No federal law or regulation currently prohibits PFAS intentionally added to cosmetic products.[41]

The EPA's PFAS reporting rule under Section 8(a)(7) of the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) requires manufacturers to report detailed use, production, and exposure data from 2011 to 2022.[42] The rule has undergone several deadline extensions, with the reporting deadline now extended to January 2027.[43] In November 2025, the EPA also proposed narrowing the rule's scope by introducing exemptions for PFAS in certain products, including imported articles, low-concentration mixtures, certain by-products, and research and development chemicals.[44] A final rule addressing these proposed exemptions is expected later in 2026. These changes may reduce the immediate burden for some businesses, but they also increase the importance of remaining abreast of new developments.

The drinking water picture remains especially dynamic. In April 2024, the EPA set enforceable Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs) for six PFAS chemicals.[45] These standards are considerably more stringent than the agency's 2016 advisory levels, and public water systems must begin monitoring by April 2027 and implement solutions to reduce PFAS by April 2029. Although the current administration moved to rescind the MCLs and underlying regulatory determinations for four of the six PFAS chemicals (those other than PFOA and perfluorooctane sulfonic acid (PFOS)), the D.C. Circuit denied those rescission attempts in two rulings issued on 21 January and 19 March 2026, leaving all six MCLs in force.[46] The regulatory picture may shift again, however: on 20 May 2026, the EPA published two proposed rules in the Federal Register, one extending the PFOA/PFOS compliance deadline to 2031 and another proposing to rescind the regulatory determinations and remove the MCLs for the four remaining PFAS.[47] Public comments are open until 20 July 2026, and a public hearing was scheduled for 7 July 2026.[48] For companies with significant water use, manufacturing exposure, or environmental liabilities, this continuing uncertainty reinforces the need to monitor both litigation and rulemaking.

State legislatures continue to shape the most aggressive part of the U.S. PFAS landscape, with Maine and Minnesota enacting

similar broad restrictions on intentionally added PFAS in consumer products and several other states implementing product-specific restrictions on reporting obligations.[49] Maine's and Minnesota's prohibitions both generally take effect in 2032.[50] On 1 January 2026, new PFAS prohibitions or reporting requirements took effect in six states—Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, Vermont, and Washington—covering product categories such as cosmetics, cleaning products, cookware, and textiles.[51] California has separately restricted PFAS in cosmetics, food packaging, and menstrual products.[52] The result of this state action is, rather than a single national rule, an increasingly fragmented patchwork that may impose different requirements across product categories, distribution channels, and reporting frameworks. For companies selling across multiple states, this patchwork can create substantial compliance complexity, particularly where product redesign, supplier certification, or state-specific labelling and disclosure obligations may be required.

Conclusion

Across Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, regulatory activity concerning PFAS is intensifying, particularly in relation to non-essential consumer and industrial applications. While approaches differ in scope, pace, and the handling of exemptions, there is a clear trend toward reducing and ultimately phasing out PFAS use. The European Union is the most advanced, with a group-based restriction covering more than 10,000 substances nearing the final stages of scientific evaluation. The United Kingdom is adopting a more cautious approach, but its national PFAS action plan and targeted restrictions signal a gradual tightening of its regulatory framework. In the United States, federal policy continues to develop, especially in relation to EPA reporting and drinking water standards, while state-level bans are contributing to a fragmented compliance environment. For the life sciences sector, key considerations include the timing, breadth, and availability of sector-specific exemptions as restrictions are implemented.

Given this evolving regulatory landscape, practical steps may be required to prepare for future compliance requirements. For non-essential products, such as cosmetics, food packaging, and certain cleaning products, it may be beneficial to evaluate the feasibility

and timelines for PFAS removal and reformulation. For essential products, including medical devices and industrial applications, it is advisable to assess the necessity of PFAS for product performance or safety, map their use across supply chains, and monitor the development of exemption frameworks in relevant jurisdictions. More broadly, it is important to review PFAS-related exposure across product lines and geographies, examine supplier and contractual arrangements, assess reporting and recordkeeping obligations, and participate in consultation processes to ensure that sector-specific needs are reflected in final regulations.

Overall, the regulatory challenge posed by PFAS is becoming more complex, and policy objectives are increasingly aligned across major jurisdictions. Proactive assessment of PFAS exposure, adaptation of compliance strategies, and engagement with regulatory developments will support effective responses as legislative restrictions continue to evolve.

Notes

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