

IEC to Develop Battery Marking Standard

September 2015

On August 21, 2015, the International Electrotechnical Commission Technical Committee 21 (IEC TC 21) approved a New Proposal (NP) 21/859/NP to develop a standardized international battery marking standard. This action comes in response to increasing concerns from secondary lead smelters about the inclusion in their input stream of lithium-ion batteries. Smelter processing of the lithium ion batteries can produce explosions. The growing availability of lithium ion batteries in the same “form factors” as lead-acid batteries has exacerbated this concern.

Overcoming these concerns no doubt will require a number of steps, of which last month’s IEC action is only one. The hope is that, with a sufficient education campaign about the significance of chemistry-specific labels, collectors who prepare pallets of lead-acid batteries for shipment to smelters can be convinced to avoid including lithium ions in their shipments. With obvious markings, it should also be easier for scrap dealers and less sophisticated collectors to avoid providing lithium ions to smelters.

The immediate proposal is only the first step in the IEC process; however, it starts the development of a standard. The concept is to include two key elements in all battery labels: (1) a label background color coding (grey for lead, aqua blue for lithium, etc.); and (2) the marking of the battery with the three chasing arrows recycling symbol and a chemical symbol (Pb, Li, Li-ion, Li-metal, etc.). The development process will be complicated by the need to conform any mandatory labeling with existing requirements in the United States, European Union, and elsewhere. Seventeen countries—including the United States—voted in the affirmative to move forward with development of a new standard.

Practice Areas

Environment & Product Regulation
Extended Producer Responsibility and
Recycling

The Working Group will hold its first meeting late September in Brussels. The current target to circulate a first stage document (Committee Draft) for international review and comment is aggressive: December 2015. The IEC expects to have a final document ready for approval at the end of 2017.

(Saskia Mooney is Secretary of the IEC TC 21 U.S. TAG.)