

22 February 2008

Radio Frequency Identification (RFID): Tracking products and consumers?

On 21 February, a public consultation was launched on the draft European Commission Recommendation which addresses the implementation of privacy, data protection and information security principles in RFID applications. Although welcoming the decision to launch a public consultation, ANEC believes RFID technologies also pose risks to health and the environment. ANEC therefore urges the Commission to consider these further risks alongside those already identified to protect consumers. As RFID technologies will significantly increase exposure to Extremely Low Frequency (ELF) elements, ANEC considers new exposure assessment procedures to test compliance with safety guidelines are needed. Moreover, further research is required to assess the potential health risks that can arise from the application of RFID technologies.

Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) is a technology for the transmission of data stored on a microchip. As the technology is 'contactless', data can be read remotely from within the local geographical environment of the microchip. Not all RFID applications raise concerns or even affect consumers. Indeed, certain applications may be beneficial to consumers (for example, telecare for people with disabilities and elderly people). However, the risks that the application of RFID technologies hold for consumer privacy (tracking or profiling of consumers), security (identity theft), health (EMF emissions) and environmental protection are of concern.

ANEC, in line with BEUC, the European Consumers' organization, welcomes the proposed adoption of the 'opt-in' principle as we believe consumers must be allowed the choice to decide whether to accept the use of RFID technologies in specific applications and whether their data should be collected.

ANEC also welcomes the recommendation to RFID operators to inform consumers about the presence of an RFID tag in a clear and accessible by all way.

"Although the draft Recommendation stresses the importance of assessing the impact of RFID applications on privacy, ANEC considers that clear security requirements are needed", said ANEC Secretary-General, Stephen Russell. "We believe the compliance of an RFID product with these requirements must be independently assured and for this assurance to be visible to consumers, perhaps in the form of a mark. Products not meeting declared requirements lead to a loss of consumer confidence. Consumers need to trust RFID technology in order to accept it."

ANEC in brief

ANEC is the European consumer voice in standardisation, representing and defending consumer interests in the process of standardisation and certification. ANEC was set up in 1995 as an international non-profit association under Belgian law and represents consumer organisations from the 27 EU Member States and 3 EFTA countries. ANEC is funded by the European Commission and the EFTA Secretariat, while national consumer organisations contribute in kind. Its Secretariat is based in Brussels.

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ANEC-PR-2008-PRL-003