

# Proposal for a Revision of the F-Gas Regulation



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## AREA POSITION

AREA represents European refrigeration, air conditioning and heat pump (RACHP) contractors. RACHP contractors are the essential link between end users and manufacturers. They design, install and maintain RACHP equipment using every available solution with complete neutrality towards equipment and refrigerants, in the sole aim of ensuring the highest level of reliability, energy efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

The European RACHP contracting industry fully subscribes to the EU's decarbonisation and climate neutrality aspirations set out in the European Green Deal and, more recently, in the Fit-for-55 package.

In this spirit, AREA also stands by the F-Gas Regulation's objectives of reducing emissions of fluorinated greenhouse gases, and in particular those with high global warming potential (GWP). In this respect, our members play an important role in the transition to climate-friendly RACHP solutions, bearing in mind that the overall environmental impact of RACHP systems needs to be considered beyond refrigerants' GWP, with a particular focus on energy efficiency and circularity of applied materials.

The F-gas Regulation is arguably the most important and impactful piece of EU legislation for our sector. Its provisions dictate the conditions under which our contractors - the immense majority of whom are very small companies with a local market - carry out most of their operations. As concluded by the European Commission's review, the current F-Gas Regulation has successfully achieved its objectives, setting a gold standard for the rest of the world.

The Regulation has also had a tremendous impact on our industry, bringing opportunities but also unprecedented challenges that put many of our companies - in particular the smallest ones - to a tough test as regards refrigerants prices, available technical alternatives, and of course competence and skills. Despite the Regulation's proven success, the proposal for a revision substantially toughens two of its core provisions - the phase-down scheme and the placing on the market prohibitions - with the stated goal of further accelerating the market penetration of alternatives, and in particular natural refrigerants. Yet, the proposal ignores the actual ability of the RACHP contracting sector to cope with such a surge.

More worryingly, it fails to ensure that equipment working with alternative refrigerants can only be handled by competent contractors, thereby leaving the door wide open to widespread safety hazards and energy inefficient equipment.

European RACHP contractors represented by AREA remain fully committed to the transition to climate-friendly alternatives to f-gases.

For such a transition to be a success, several conditions ought to be met: the timing needs to be aligned with market and technological realities, equipment obsolescence should not be unduly forced, and alternative refrigerants - most of which are also greenhouse gases - should be properly regulated. It is also necessary that national authorities are ready. Indeed, they are in charge of setting and implementing some of the administrative framework surrounding many of the legal provisions, as well as enforcing those. Their readiness is a prerequisite so that market operators can fulfill their own respective requirements.

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With this in mind, AREA would like to give its opinion on the proposal for a revision and make concrete suggestions for changes to ensure that the overall EU ambition is preserved.

## FILLING THE GAPS ON ALTERNATIVE REFRIGERANTS

The transition towards climate-friendly alternatives to HFCs can only happen provided the conditions for the safe and efficient use of those alternatives are set. Whilst the proposal rightfully aims to “facilitate the use of alternative substances” and includes HFOs, it falls short of translating this objective into a concrete framework actually allowing it to be achieved. This would be the case if the Regulation – or at least parts thereof – was to apply to all types of refrigerants. That would make the Regulation more comprehensive and coherent. Indeed, there is an intrinsic connection between fluorinated greenhouse gases and alternative refrigerants. EU policies on the former have an immediate impact on the latter, and ultimately it is the same market. Moreover, there is an obvious environmental rationale since most alternative refrigerants also are greenhouse gases with a GWP. An extension is therefore fully in line with the Regulation’s scope and legal base. Concretely, AREA suggests extending to ‘alternative refrigerant greenhouse gases’ the following requirements:

- Training and certification scheme: whilst the proposal clarifies for the inclusion of alternative refrigerants in training and certification schemes, it does not mandate the installation and maintenance of RACHP equipment with alternative refrigerants by certified installers only, as is the case now with HFCs. Concretely, this means that anybody can install RACHP equipment running with hydrocarbons (flammable) or with CO<sub>2</sub> (high pressures).

Correlated with the fact that the new phase-down and bans will push the use of hydrocarbons for small air conditioning and heat

pump solutions in households, the proposal generates unnecessary safety (potential accidents) and environmental (lower energy efficiency) risks.

- Leak checks: as a complement to the point above, it is necessary to extend periodical inspections and leak checks to prevent safety risks on technicians, personnel and end-users. Since they were introduced in the 2006 F-gas Regulation, leak check requirements have proven to be effective and efficient, bringing lower leakage rates with positive climate and energy consumption impacts. With the increased use of alternative refrigerants, all of which present safety issues and many of which are flammable, regular leak checks are necessary to ensure safe and energy-efficient system operation. Countries such as Spain have already mandated leak checks on all types of refrigerants.

- Sale of refrigerants: the existing requirements on the sale of fluorinated greenhouse gases, whether in bulk or pre-charged in non-hermetically sealed equipment, should be extended to alternative refrigerant greenhouse gases.

## BANS AND PHASE-DOWN

The current phase-down scheme has been a source of opportunities but also great challenges for small RACHP contractors, who were faced with shortages and sharp price increases. As it is proposed, the new stricter phase-down will pose enormous challenges for the entire heating and cooling industry, and this for several reasons:

- Threatens the full roll-out of heat pumps required as per RePowerEU
- Already from 2027 onwards, difficulty to find refrigerant to service equipment

- With hundreds of thousands of technicians needing to be upskilled to safely handle highly flammable refrigerants, the installer base will just not manage to make the conversion in time unless there is concerted action from EU and national authorities to alleviate the shortage of both training facilities and trainers across Europe as there

remains a shortage of both training facilities and trainers across the EU. This is likely to amplify the already existing issue of unskilled companies and personnel installing equipment.

The complementary bans proposed seem almost redundant since the stricter phase-down will effectively prevent the use of virgin refrigerant for new equipment from 2027 onwards. Moreover, a number of terms used in the definitions of the bans are unclear and will lead to inconsistent interpretations: ‘self-contained’, ‘when required to meet safety standards’. Finally, the inclusion of “parts thereof” affects spare parts and components, meaning that it will be impossible to maintain and repair existing equipment. Not only does it go against the EU Circular Economy Strategy and EU Sustainable Product Initiative (SPI), but it also encourages extended use of inefficient equipment.

On specific bans proposed, AREA welcomes the comprehensive ban on non-refillable containers. On the other hand, ban 18 on stationary split air-conditioning equipment and split heat pump equipment comes too soon. An additional minimum of 3 years would be necessary for the market to adjust. In practice, the ban would push hydrocarbons solutions. Despite hydrocarbons’ high flammability, in the absence of mandatory certification, these units could then be installed by anybody and there would be no obligation to have them leak checked.

## ENFORCEMENT

AREA supports the provisions aimed at addressing illegal trade and generally improving enforcement. We also welcome the possibility for Member States to enable electronic logbooks / electronic central database for record keeping obligations.

For the sake of transparency and consistency, the European Commission should be empowered to either develop such a tool at European level or establish a framework for national logbooks to be shared at European level.