

Editorial

SPOLD

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Nearly every LCA practitioner has heard about the SPOLD format [1,2,3], everybody who is interested can download its electronic version from the Internet¹, and major LCA software suppliers are presently integrating it in their systems. But what happened to SPOLD?

In spring 1999, the society will open the SPOLD data network (SDN) to the interested public. This network will offer a central contact point with an electronic directory of all LCI² data available. The data itself remains on the decentralized database servers of the participating data suppliers, and is thus under the full control of their owners - also with respect to access rights, copyright, and pricing. In simple terms, the SDN central contact point will be used like the "yellow pages" in a phone book. Of course, the data sets on SDN will be documented according to the SPOLD format, which will also facilitate the data exchange between suppliers and requesters. The software engineers of IPU³ who already prepared the SPOLD format software, are ready to start the development of the network software in August 1998.

The "technical" part of the SDN, called SIS (SPOLD Information System), will be accompanied by an electronic forum of the data suppliers (on the Internet), to ensure its proper functioning. During the second half of 1998, SPOLD intends to invite an initial group of experienced and generally respected LCI database owners to join the network. Later, the SDN will hopefully grow, encompass most important data suppliers, and become self-organizing, much like a small sister of the Internet.

For SPOLD itself, 1998 will be the last year of its traditional role as industry's LCA sponsoring organization. It will retain the copyrights to the format and the SIS, but

the central contact point should eventually go to a financially independent owner⁴; negotiations with the EU for possible funding are underway. SPOLD will most likely transform from an industry association (with substantial annual dues for the participating companies) to an open society of LCI data providers and users (charging very moderate personal membership fees). A SPOLD review board should be elected to supervise the operation of the SDN, and to trigger further developments of the network.

Why this change? Simply, the world of LCA has changed. After its start in 1992, SPOLD mobilized considerable financial resources to accelerate the development of sound life-cycle assessment (LCA) methodology and to make LCA an accepted management tool. Its activities resulted in a number of publications⁵, starting with the LCA sourcebook [4] that presented basic information on LCA techniques, practitioners, and data sources. Monographs on impact assessment in the use of LCA [5] and LCA application in various fields [6,7,8] followed.

In 1995, SPOLD launched the project "Winning Acceptance", to create a constructive dialogue and build consensus between the stakeholder industry, governments, environmentalists, professional groups, and academic institutions [9]. Finally, the working group "Promoting Sound Practices" (PSP) addressed the widespread need of the LCA community for reliable inventory data involving commodities and other frequently used goods and services. To facilitate LCI data exchange and the choice of relevant data sets, it published the directory of life-cycle inventory data sources [10] (a comprehensive survey of potentially useful basic data) and developed the SPOLD format, which has meanwhile found wide acceptance.

¹ The electronic version of the SPOLD format, together with the paper specifications and an example, is available at <http://ipt.dtu.dk/~bow>.

² Life cycle inventory

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⁴ IPU generously offered to host the central contact point for another year.

⁵ All SPOLD publications mentioned in this article can be obtained from: SPOLD, c/o Dr. P. Hindle, Procter & Gamble SPRL, B-1853 Strombeek-Bever, Phone +32-2-456 24 58, Fax +32-2-456 28 49

As the companies in SPOLD had hoped, these initiatives led to a variety of other activities. Business-sponsored stakeholder dialogues became much more common. Some of the member companies of SPOLD founded and remain very active in European Partners for the Environment⁶ which employs dialogue to work a wide range of issues. Another issue for SPOLD, the integration of LCA into a comprehensive "environmental toolbox" (together with MFA, ERA⁷, etc.), was successfully adopted by other organizations (LCANET [11] and later CHAINET⁸). The challenges of using LCA in small and medium enterprises are closely linked to those of gaining eco-efficiency improvements. The task of finding ways of stimulating and helping companies in these important areas was beyond the resources of SPOLD. Again, many of the member companies of SPOLD are involved in the World Business Council for Sustainable Development which is working with the European Partners for the Environment to find ways of building institutional capability that can help small and medium companies.

The success of the SPOLD data format has out-grown the narrow limits of a traditional industry association. A rising number of associate members (LCA consulting firms, universities, scientific institutes, etc.) joined SPOLD and had their experts engaged in the data exchange project. It became clear that the format and especially the network needed to be built on a wider, more solid base. SETAC Europe decided to form a work group on data availability and data quality [12] which comprises practically all members of SPOLD's PSP group, together with representatives from most important LCA data and software suppliers, and many other interested parties.

The data suppliers in the SETAC workgroup spontaneously decided to cooperate in an "implementation" subgroup, on the basis of the SPOLD and the SPINE [13] formats, and under consideration of the SIS/SDN concepts. SPOLD decided to foster this promising initiative with an operational version of SIS which will be made available for the activities of the SETAC work group.

SPOLD as an industry association will soon be history – we hope that we used the funds entrusted to us suitably to improve the quality and applicability of LCA work. SPOLD, as a forum of LCA practitioners from industry,

consultants, government, and academia, however, is as lively as ever⁹, open to all LCA practitioners interested in the free flow of LCI data along the whole life cycle, the transparency of LCI studies, and in high data quality.

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⁶ For more information, consult the Internet: <http://www.epe.be/>

⁷ MFA: Material flow analysis; ERA: Environmental risk assessment

⁸ For more information, consult the Internet: <http://www.leidenuniv.nl/interfac/cml/chainet.hp22.htm>

⁹ In fall 1998, SPOLD will decide on its new organization, and will inform the LCA community.