



## Light battle continues

For nearly a year, a draft amendment to Germany's Radiation Protection Code proposed by the Federal Ministry of the Environment (BMU) has had some Swiss watchmakers on the barricades. The amendment, which would ban the use of tritium in all consumer goods, was scheduled for a vote in the Federal Council this summer. Tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen, is widely present in nature, but it was at one time used as an effective alternative to radium – deemed poisonous – for the illumination of watch hands and hour markers. The vote has now been postponed until after the Germany's federal elections on September 27, much to the relief of a number of companies using a technology known as Gaseous Tritium Light Source (GTLS) to illuminate instruments such as watches and telescopic sights.

The companies in question, Mondaine Ltd., which markets several watch brands, and mb-microtec, maker of Traser watches, argue that the law fails to distinguish between paint-on tritium and GTLS, where the tritium gas is enclosed in a tiny glass tube and acts as a phosphorizing agent. This creates a self-powered glow that will hold for up to 25 years. "There is no real alternative to GTLS," says André Bernheim, CEO of Mondaine Ltd., which manufactures and markets among others Luminor watches. These military-style timepieces are in fact favored by a number of special forces, including the Navy SEALs in the USA. "We experimented with Super-Luminova paint, which is more commonly used, but the glow disappears within a few hours." Furthermore, the company argues, the tritium in the glass tubes is perfectly safe. "You have to use your

imagination: for any gas to escape, you would have to literally crush the watch and probably anything in the vicinity including the person wearing it," says Martin Grossenbacher, Luminor product manager.

In the spring of this year, Mondaine and mb-microtech launched a campaign to inform Germany's legislators of the difference between tritium paint and GTLS. mb-microtech, which manufactures GTLS under the name trigalight and uses it in its own brand of watches, the Traser, has produced research suggesting that eating a banana a day or riding up to the 15th floor of a high-rise building, will expose a person to more natural tritium than inhaling the gas from a destroyed watch. As for Mondaine Ltd., it is also quick to point out that their watches have been subjected to a tough contamination test before being sold in the USA. The watches are immersed in water for 24 hours, and the water is then tested for traces of radioactivity. "In twenty years, we have not failed a single test," says André Bernheim emphatically. "There is no danger, they are chasing ghosts."

The efforts of Mondaine and the other companies potentially affected by a full ban have been rewarded. At least five out of Germany's sixteen federal states have expressed support for making an exception to the amendment for GTLS should it become law. For Bernheim, however, there is no rest: "We are working on a recycling concept similar to Germany's 'green dot,' whereby the consumer can return the watch in the unlikely event he or she no longer wants it. We will then dispose of it appropriately."

*Marton Radkai*

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