

News Toxic Substances

Risk Assessment

EPA System for Evaluating Chemical Risk Said to Be Broken, Affecting Public Health

The Environmental Protection Agency's process for evaluating chemical hazards and taking action to protect the public from harm is broken and harming people's health, the chairman of the House Science and Technology Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight said June 12.

"This system defies common sense. It is broken, and it is condemning people to future health problems," said Rep. Brad Miller (D-N.C.) at the opening of a hearing that focused on EPA's Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS) but expanded to discuss other environmental policy concerns.

Both Miller and ranking member James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.) criticized the slow pace of the IRIS system.

It has been more than 20 years since EPA began an IRIS assessment of trichloroethylene (TCE), but the agency has not yet completed it, Miller said. On June 11, Miller sent the Office of Management and Budget a letter requesting a variety of information about EPA's assessment of trichloroethylene and the office's role in that review.

Sensenbrenner added: "EPA determined its formaldehyde assessment was outdated in 1997, but 11 years later, that assessment is still incomplete.

"These hurricane victims are the real-world result of EPA's bureaucratic failures," he said, referring to individuals and families who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina and then placed in trailers with high levels of formaldehyde.

Miller said the "glacial pace" at which EPA assesses chemicals means exposures to toxic substances that remain unregulated or under-regulated continue for years, sometimes decades, "and contamination is not cleaned up or not cleaned up to a level that we think is actually safe."

Each IRIS assessment provides hazard and dose-response information on chemicals. Typically, IRIS assessments contain up to four pieces of information, called toxicity values, which a risk assessor uses--in combination with exposure data--to determine the extent of risk a substance poses in a particular situation.

Numbers Make a Difference

"Those numbers in IRIS actually make a difference in people's lives," said Lenny Siegel, executive director of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight, which focuses on the impact Defense Department sites have on environmental health.


"Those numbers make a difference as to whether water gets treated," he said.

Jerome M. Ensminger, a retired marine, described the pain and suffering his family went through when their six-year-old daughter, Janey, was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia. He said he thought the disease resulted from her exposure to volatile organic solvents, including TCE, while living in Camp Lejeune, N.C.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) has found twice the rate of cancer in children exposed to TCE while in the womb than it would have expected to find, he said.

He pointed to problems beyond IRIS.

"Marine Corps officials knew of the existence of this contamination in their drinking water for five years before they took any action," he said, adding they dragged their feet in providing or failed to provide information to ATSDR to enable that agency to assess the health risks at the site.

Ensminger blasted a plan EPA revealed in April that would allow the "nation's largest polluter," the Defense Department, to meet privately with the agency to raise concerns about IRIS assessments. Miller's subcommittee held a hearing on that topic May 21 (32 CRR 512, 5/26/08 )

"It is beyond my comprehension why an entity with that type of reputation and who has a vested interest in seeing little to no environmental oversight would be included in the scientific process," he said.

Siegel and Linda Greer, director of the health program at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said DOD and other federal agencies should participate in the IRIS process but do so during the public comment period when all stakeholders get to weigh in.

Greer, however, took issue with testimony that Susan Dudley, administrator of OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, gave May 21 telling Miller private companies would not be able to privately influence EPA's assessments during the nonpublic interagency discussion of the document.

DOD relies so extensively on contractors, and those contractors could be part of the interagency, private, discussions, Greer said.

Let National Research Council Do Evaluations

David G. Hoel, a professor at the Medical University of South Carolina, did not

appear due to airport delays. But in his written testimony, he recommended EPA reform the IRIS process by allowing an organization like the National Research Council to convene non-agency scientific experts to evaluate chemicals.

Other concerns the three witnesses voiced during the hearing included Congress's decision in the 1980s to waive peer review obligations for ATSDR health assessments, which Ensminger said means the assessment of Camp Lejeune's health effects is a "piece of crap."

In response to a question by Miller, Greer said the European Union's registration, evaluation, and authorization of chemicals (REACH) regulation, which presumes that a chemical is "guilty until proven innocent," is a smart idea.

Miller's letter to OMB is available at
http://democrats.science.house.gov/Media/File/AdminLetters/Miller_Dudley_IRIS_06.11.08.pdf 

By Pat Rizzuto