



EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE:
November 9, 2010

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EPA's Toxic Chemical Database Woefully Out of Date Despite Obama Administration Reforms; Backlog Will Persist for Decades At Current Rate

New CPR Report Says Process for Assessing Dangerous Chemicals Has Improved Somewhat Yet Remains Troublingly Slow and Politicized

(Washington) - The Environmental Protection Agency is years behind in completing risk assessments of at least 255 toxic chemicals, stalling regulatory and enforcement actions on the use of those chemicals, says a new report today from the Center for Progressive Reform. The report assesses the status of reforms the Obama Administration announced in May 2009 to the Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS), the EPA's primary toxic chemical database, and finds limited progress.

"The Obama Administration's reforms were certainly an improvement from the Bush Administration, but the process remains politicized and far too slow. The EPA is assessing chemicals a bit faster now, yet at this rate it will still be decades before it completes assessments of many chemicals Congress instructed it to evaluate," said report co-author Rena Steinzor, President of CPR and Professor at the University of Maryland School of Law. "What's missing here is a sense of urgency. At their current pace, it'll be half a century before they complete congressionally mandated assessments on dozens of chemicals already in use. They're moving faster than the Bush EPA did, but that's cold comfort."

The CPR report, [*Corrective Lenses for IRIS: Reforms to Improve EPA's Integrated Risk Information System*](#), finds:

- Thirty-two hazardous air pollutants (HAPs) regulated under the Clean Air Act are not listed in IRIS at all, and 77 are listed but lack inhalation values, hampering the EPA's ability to conduct residual risk assessments to provide an ample margin of safety.
- Three of 71 contaminants regulated under the Safe Drinking Water Act are not listed, and neither are 64 of the 156 substances nominated to the Contaminant Candidate List, slowing EPA's ability to develop enforceable standards for drinking water contamination.
- Eighty-seven of the 275 substances frequently found in Superfund sites and identified by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry as "high profile" have not been assessed.

IRIS "profiles" of substances include a number of scientific assessments of toxicity to humans; federal regulators, as well as state and local governments and regulated industry itself, rely on the assessments to make decisions in protecting the public from harm.

After EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson announced reforms to IRIS in May 2009, CPR issued a report in June 2009 finding that those reforms would not address key problems identified by the

Government Accountability Office and others ([*The IRIS Information Roadblock: How Gaps in EPA's Main Toxicological Database Weaken Environmental Protection*](#)). The new report from CPR today looks at how the process has worked in practice since then, finding that progress on chemical assessments has only improved modestly.

The CPR report finds that interagency review of individual chemical assessments, industry efforts to hijack the process through Data Quality Act petitions, overuse of science advisory boards, and a focus on high profile and complex assessments have all prevented EPA from completing assessments in a timely and transparent way.

In one example from this year, the White House Office of Management and Budget submitted comments on the reassessment of 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (dioxin), expressing disappointment that EPA did not calculate a "margin of exposure" in proposing a reference dose. But OMB's complaints about whether and how to subdivide exposed populations for an IRIS assessment are science policy decisions that should be addressed through generic guidance on default assumptions, not during review of individual chemicals. Allowing OMB – with its staff of just two scientists – to interfere in risk assessments of individual chemicals is inappropriate, leading to delayed assessments and opening the door for special interests to intrude on EPA scientists' work.

EPA completed nine IRIS assessments in 2009 and is on track to complete nine in 2010, an improvement from the two-per-year pace during the Bush Administration. But at the new rate, it would still take approximately 55 years to complete all of the assessments that EPA program offices need to complete statutory responsibilities.

U.S. Rep. Brad Miller, chair of the Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee of the House Committee on Science and Technology, and a congressional leader in IRIS oversight, received an advance copy of the CPR report and issued the following statement: "There is no room for politics in assessing the public health risk from exposure to a toxic chemical. IRIS was badly broken in the Bush Administration, and I'm disappointed that IRIS is still too slow and cumbersome. We can't wait for clusters of rare cancers or birth defects to tell us the consequences of a chemical exposure."

The white paper was written by CPR Member Scholars Rena Steinzor, Wendy Wagner, and CPR Policy Analysts Lena Pons and Matthew Shudtz. It is available on CPR's website at www.progressivereform.org/articles/IRIS_1009.pdf.

The Center for Progressive Reform (www.progressivereform.org) is a nonprofit research and educational organization dedicated to protecting health, safety, and the environment through analysis and commentary. Visit CPR on the web at www.progressivereform.org and read CPRBlog at www.progressivereform.org/cprblog.

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