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New CPR Report:
EPA's IRIS Database 'Outdated, Incomplete, Ineffective';
Administrator Jackson's Reforms 'Leave Major Issues Unresolved'

Authors Call on EPA to Abandon IRIS Interagency Review

House Sci/Tech Subcommittee Hearing Set for June 11, 1 pm

(Washington) – A new report from the Center for Progressive Reform concludes that EPA's main toxicological database—the Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS)—is “outdated, incomplete, and ultimately ineffective,” and that reforms to the IRIS process announced by EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson “fail to go far enough to liberate the process from inappropriate interference.” Specifically, the report calls on EPA to abandon the Bush era interagency review process for IRIS listings, a process designed to compromise IRIS's scientific integrity.

The report, “The IRIS Information Roadblock: How Gaps in EPA's Main Toxicological Database Weaken Environmental Protection,” notes that in 1990 Congress directed EPA to develop rapid regulatory controls for 188 hazardous air pollutants (HAPs), and required EPA to conduct follow-up assessments to see how effective the safeguards were at protecting Americans. Report authors Rena Steinzor, Wendy Wagner and Matthew Shudtz write that, “Today, nearly 20 years after Congress gave EPA a list of priority chemicals, some 17 percent are not listed in IRIS at all. Worse, two-thirds of the Clean Air Act HAPs do not have inhalation [standards] listed in the database.”

IRIS will be the subject of a hearing by the Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee of the House Science and Technology Committee, Thursday June 11 at 1:00 pm in 2318 Rayburn.

“It's intolerable that IRIS is so woefully incomplete,” said CPR President Rena Steinzor. “Because IRIS numbers are the cornerstones for decisions to protect public health, these omissions hurt real people across the country and around the globe. Putting the Pentagon and OMB economists in a position to decide whether and how much rocket fuel is safe in drinking water was a terrible idea pursued with a vengeance by the Bush Administration. EPA's decision to punt on these well-known problems in its revised process misses a crucial opportunity to take special interest politics out of health and safety science. We hope EPA will see that this new policy will make it very difficult—if not impossible—to update IRIS quickly.”

Among the HAPs for which IRIS profiles are either incomplete or nonexistent are hydrogen fluoride and chloroprene (no profile for either) and formaldehyde and methanol (missing key

data on inhalation doses). High exposures to chloroprene, formaldehyde, and methanol can be deadly; exposure to hydrogen fluoride can damage the bones and heart.

Chemical profiles in the database present the acceptable numerical dose of each chemical that, if ingested (eaten), inhaled, or absorbed through the skin could cause cancer, brain damage, respiratory illness, and a variety of other adverse health effects. To fix these values – which then become crucial cornerstones for pollution control – EPA scientists compile the best available scientific research, study and debate disparate and sometimes contradictory research findings, and consider the “weight of the evidence.” The EPA imprimatur placed on toxicological values at the end of the IRIS process gives them great weight – not just for EPA regulatory decisions but in private-sector decisionmaking, litigation, and elsewhere.

Precisely because IRIS listings are so important, they have become a target for polluters. And the report notes that the Bush Administration reformed the IRIS process to make it easier for industry to attack EPA’s scientific judgments. The authors write, “During the Bush Administration, [these special interests] had important allies at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) who successfully imposed so many opportunities for review and second-guessing that EPA found it very difficult to update IRIS.”

On May 20, 2009, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson announced IRIS reforms, “making strides toward streamlining the process but failing to go far enough to liberate the process from inappropriate interference,” the authors write. They call for two additional reforms:

- 1) Revoking Interagency Review. The entire interagency review process undermines the scientific integrity of the IRIS process and should be abandoned. Other agencies should comment, if they so choose, during the public comment period.
- 2) Setting Priorities. EPA should revise its agenda for expanding the IRIS database so as to ensure that the agency has the tools necessary to achieve its statutory mandates. For instance, EPA should commit to completing individual profiles for Clean Air Act HAPs within specific, reasonable periods of time.

“Lisa Jackson’s reforms are helpful, but they don’t go far enough,” Steinzor said. “The Bush Administration’s interagency review process was a thinly disguised effort to slow down the process while giving the Pentagon – the nation’s biggest toxic polluter – and other agencies less concerned with environmental protection, a chance to influence, even veto, the scientific judgment of EPA. Those agencies should get their say, but they shouldn’t get a free whack at the science. They should make whatever comments they have during public comment periods.”

The report is available online at www.progressivereform.org/articles/cpr_iris_904.pdf.

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