

# EPA a failure on chemicals, audit finds

## Assessment of toxic risks inadequate, says new chief

*By Meg Kissinger of the Journal Sentinel*

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**Warning:** Chemicals in the packaging, surfaces or contents of many products may cause long-term health effects, including cancers of the breast, brain and testicles; lowered sperm counts, early puberty and other reproductive system defects; diabetes; attention deficit disorder, asthma and autism. **A decade ago, the government promised to test these chemicals. It still hasn't.**

The Environmental Protection Agency's ability to assess toxic chemicals is as broken as the nation's financial markets and needs a total overhaul, a congressional audit has found. The Government Accountability Office has released a report saying the EPA lacks even basic information to say whether chemicals pose substantial health risks to the public. It says actions are needed to streamline and increase the transparency of the EPA's registry of chemicals. And it calls for measures to enhance the agency's ability to obtain health and safety information from the chemical industry.

Lisa Jackson, the EPA's new administrator, promised to take the report under consideration. "It is clear that we are not doing an adequate job of assessing and managing the risks of chemicals in consumer products, the workplace and the environment," Jackson said in a prepared statement Friday. "It is now time to revise and strengthen EPA's chemicals management and risk assessment programs." The Journal Sentinel has chronicled the failure of the EPA to disclose information about toxic chemicals in its series, "Chemical Fallout," which began in 2007. Last month, the newspaper reported that the agency routinely allows companies to keep new information about their chemicals secret, including compounds that have been shown to cause cancer and respiratory problems.

Earlier in 2008, the Journal Sentinel revealed that the EPA's Voluntary Children's Chemical Evaluation Program, which relies on companies to provide information about the dangers of the chemicals they produce, is all but dead. And it disclosed that the agency's program to screen chemicals that damage the endocrine system had failed to screen a single chemical more than 10 years after the program was launched. Health and environmental advocates pounced on the GAO's findings as proof that the EPA has been shirking its responsibilities for years. "This just shows that the EPA is not any better able to protect Americans from risky chemicals than FEMA was to save New Orleans or the SEC was to cope with the financial collapse," said John Peterson Myers, a scientist and author who has been writing about chemical risks

to human health for more than three decades.

For the EPA to be compared to the collapsed financial markets dramatically underscores the need for a complete overhaul of the regulation of toxic chemicals, said Richard Wiles, executive director of Environmental Working Group, a health watchdog organization based in Washington, D.C. "The EPA joins the hall of shame of failed government programs," Wiles said. The EPA is at high risk for waste, fraud, abuse and mismanagement and needs a broad-based transformation, the auditors found. "The EPA lacks adequate scientific information on the toxicity of many chemicals that may be found in the environment - as well as on tens of thousands of chemicals used commercially in the United States," the GAO report said. "EPA's inadequate progress in assessing toxic chemicals significantly limits the agency's ability to fulfill its mission of protecting human health and the environment." The EPA's ability to protect public health and the environment depends on credible and timely assessments of the risks posed by toxic chemicals, the GAO found. Its Integrated Risk Information System, which contains assessments of more than 500 toxic chemicals, "is at serious risk of becoming obsolete because the EPA has been unable to keep its existing assessments current or to complete assessments of important chemicals of concern."

The EPA urgently needs to streamline and increase the transparency of this assessment process, the report says. "Overall, the EPA has finished only nine assessments in the past three years," the report found. "At the end of 2007, most of the 70 ongoing assessments had been under way for more than five years." The EPA needs additional authority to that provided in the Toxic Substances Control Act to obtain health and safety information from the chemical industry, the GAO auditors found. "They need to shift more of the burden to chemical companies to demonstrate the safety of their products," the report found. Strengthening the EPA is one of the GAO's three most urgent priorities for the Obama administration. The GAO also called for overhauling the nation's financial regulatory system, whose inattention helped trigger the global financial crisis, and improving the Food and Drug Administration's ability to protect the public from unsafe or ineffective drugs and other medical products.

The list is updated every two years and released at the start of each new Congress to help in setting oversight agendas. Recent Congresses and administrations have been particularly alert to GAO's High-Risk List and have used its findings to help tailor agency-specific solutions as well as broader initiatives across government.

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