# Nanotech: Unpredictable And Un-Regulated - New Report From ETC Group

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The ETC Group releases a new Communiqué today that provides an update on policy discussions related to nanotech health and safety issues and the glaring lack of regulatory oversight. According to the ETC Group, governments on both sides of the Atlantic are reluctantly and belatedly conceding that current safety and health regulations may not be adequate to address the special exigencies of nano-scale materials.

In sharp contrast to the political climate one year ago, the potential health and environmental risks of some nano-scale technologies are being openly discussed in Europe and North America. Since mid-2002, ETC Group has called for a moratorium on the use of synthetic nanoparticles in the lab and in any new commercial products until governments adopt “best practices” for research.

The full text of the 12-page report is available online: www.etcgroup.org/article.asp?newsid=470

“Ironically, governments are talking about the need to be proactive, failing to admit that they’re at least one decade late: nanotech products are already commercially available and laboratory workers and consumers are already being exposed to nanoparticles that could pose serious risks to people and the environment,” says Pat Mooney, Executive Director of ETC Group in Ottawa. The US government estimates that one million new workers will be employed in nanotech-related industries within the next decade. And the global nanotech market is expected to tip $1 trillion in just seven years, according to

Mike Roco of the US National Science Foundation.

“Only a handful of toxicological studies exist on engineered nanoparticles, but not-so-tiny red flags are popping up everywhere,” points out Jim Thomas, ETC Group Programme Officer based in Oxford, England. In May, the world’s second largest re-insurance company, Swiss Re, warned that the unknown and unpredictable risks associated with nanotoxicity or nanopollution could make nanotechnology un-insurable.

“Will governments that are spending billions of dollars of taxpayer money to promote nanotech research adopt rigorous regulatory oversight or will they simply tinker with existing regulations and propose voluntary guidelines? When will they address seriously the wider concerns related to social and economic impacts of technologies converging at the nano-scale?” asks Kathy Jo Wetter, ETC Group researcher in Carrboro, North Carolina, USA.

The new Communiqué also features an update and analysis of the “Grey Goo” debate – the nanotech disaster scenario described by Eric Drexler of the Foresight Institute. ETC Group dismisses Grey Goo as a red herring, but it concludes that the field of nanobiotechnology (the convergence of nano and bio) and the specter of “Green Goo” pose an urgent need for foresight and caution. Will new life forms, especially those that are designed to function autonomously in the environment, open a Pandora’s box of unforeseen and uncontrollable consequences?

Governments are suffering from myopia when it comes to nanotechnology, warns ETC Group. “Even as governments and industry belatedly accept that engineered nanoparticles may require regulation, they insist that more advanced stages of nanotech are too far over the horizon to consider regulating. They’re wrong – we must look beyond nanoparticles to consider more advanced stages such as

nanobiotechnology and a host of socio-economic impacts related to human rights, defense and trade," says Jim Thomas of ETC Group.

ETC Group concludes that society is not ready for the technological and economic upheaval that nano-scale technologies will deliver. Given the huge amount of government and private sector funding and the accelerated pace of scientific breakthroughs, it is a mistake for governments to focus on a 3-5 year horizon for regulating nanotech.

The nanotech industry prides itself on having learned the lessons of biotech, insisting that they won't repeat the missteps and mistakes associated with the introduction of genetically modified crops. Based on current trends, it looks like they're en route to another disastrous technology introduction.

ETC Group insists that government regulations are not enough. Society must be fully engaged in a discussion of the socio-economic as well as health and environmental implications of nano-scale technologies. These issues must be considered by civil society in open, informed debates at the local, national and international levels.

Rather than being forced to scramble and react to one technological wave after the other, the international community must create a new body dedicated to track, evaluate and accept or reject new technologies and their products through an International Convention on the Evaluation of New Technologies (ICENT).

Source: Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration

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