

Poll reveals public awareness of nanotech stuck at low level

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National survey findings released today indicate that Americans' awareness of nanotechnology remains low. Popular awareness is nearly as small as the tiny nanoscale materials and nano-enabled devices and products now flowing onto the market from this rapidly progressing technology that experts believe will usher in a new industrial revolution.

The poll also finds that most Americans continue to prefer that government, not industry, oversee and manage risks associated with advances in new areas of science and technology like nanotech, even though public confidence in U.S. regulatory agencies overall is declining.

The poll, a follow up to a similar poll conducted last year, surveyed 1,014 U.S. adults by telephone on August 27-28. It, as well as the prior poll, was commissioned by the Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and conducted by independent research firm Peter D. Hart Research.

Even with an estimated \$50 billion worth of nanotechnology manufactured goods on the global market last year, only 6 percent of Americans – or fewer than one in 16 – say they have “heard a lot” about nanotechnology, as compared with 10 percent in 2006. In 2007, 21 percent say they have “heard some” about nanotechnology, unchanged from the previous year. Similarly, as in 2006, about 70 percent of adults say they have heard “just a little” or “nothing at all.”

Women of all ages, older Americans, and individuals with less education

and lower incomes are least likely to have heard about nanotechnology.

“Even though the number of nanotechnology-enabled consumer products – from dietary supplements to skin products to electronic devices – has more than doubled to over 500 products since last year, the ‘needle’ on public awareness of nanotechnology remains stuck at disappointingly low levels,” says David Rejeski, director of the Wilson Center’s Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies. “Efforts to inform the public have not kept pace with the growth of this new technology area. This increases the danger that the slightest bump – even a false alarm about safety or health – could undermine public confidence, engender consumer mistrust, and, as a result, damage the future of nanotechnology, before the most exciting applications are realized. If they do not effectively engage a broad swath of the public in steering the course of nanotechnology, government and industry risk squandering a tremendous opportunity.”

Specific polling questions examined opinions on the safety of our food system as well as the use of nanotechnology in food packaging and products. Over 60 percent of the public feels that the food supply has become less safe in recent years. Of the federal agencies most responsible for food safety, all earn similar public-confidence ratings: 57 percent to 59 percent of adults say they have at least a “fair amount” of confidence in the agencies’ ability to maximize benefits and minimize risks stemming from advances in science and technology.

Key findings specific to food and nanotechnology include:

-- Only 7 percent of Americans say they would purchase food enhanced with nanotechnology, while slightly more (12 percent) say they would buy food-storage containers enhanced with nanotechnology.

--- Substantial majorities – 62 percent in the case of food and 73 percent in the case of nanotechnology-enhanced food containers – say they need

more information about health risks and benefits before deciding whether to purchase such products.

-- Adults who have heard a lot about nanotechnology are almost three times more likely to use food storage products enhanced with nanotechnology (31 percent compared to 11 percent), and are two and a half times more likely to use foods enhanced with nanotechnology (15 percent compared to 6 percent).

Other key findings from the 2007 poll include:

-- About half (51 percent) of the public are unwilling to make any judgment about the anticipated risks and benefits of nanotechnology, and another quarter of Americans think risks and benefits will be about equal. Of the remainder, 18 percent say benefits will outweigh risks and 6 percent think risks will exceed benefits.

-- Once provided with a brief description of the potential benefits and potential risks of nanotechnology, those who completely lack awareness of it are significantly more likely to shift to the opinion that the risks will outweigh benefits. Among the 42 percent of adults who had heard nothing at all about nanotechnology, the proportion who said risks will outweigh benefits increased 27 points, from 4 percent to 31 percent, after being read the statement about potential risks and benefits.

-- Confidence in business dropped, falling five points since 2006. Forty-four (44) percent of Americans have a fair amount or a great deal of confidence in business to maximize benefits and minimize risks of new products and technologies they produce.

“As in previous polls, the results of this survey indicate that public wants more information about nanotechnology. Most Americans will be reluctant to use nano food and food-related products until they know

enough to evaluate the merits of these products,” according to Rejeski.

Source: Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies

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