

Panel blasts federal nanotech risk research strategy

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A National Research Council (NRC) committee today issued a highly critical report describing serious shortfalls in the Bush administration's strategy to better understand the environment, health and safety (EHS) risks of nanotechnology and to effectively manage those potential risks.

The report, Review of the Federal Strategy to Address Environmental, Health, and Safety Research Needs for Engineered Nanoscale Materials, calls for a significantly revamped national strategic plan that will minimize potential risks so that innovation will flourish and society will reap nanotechnology's benefits.

Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies (PEN) Director David Rejeski maintains the "lessons learned" in the NRC report offer a silver lining that will help guide the administration of President-elect Barack Obama.

"It is disappointing that the Bush administration did not listen to PEN experts – and repeated calls from nanotech industry and congressional leaders from both parties – for an improved and revamped risk research plan for nanotechnology. Their delay has hurt investor and consumer confidence. It has gambled with public health and safety. It has jeopardized the \$14 billion investment governments and private industry have made in this technology and its great promise for huge advancements in health care, energy and manufacturing. But I am encouraged that the NRC assessment will provide a roadmap for the next administration to make up for this lost time. It's time to get the job done

and to get it done right," says Rejeski.

The risk research plan developed under the National Nanotechnology Initiative (NNI) has been widely criticized by consumer groups, chemical industry representatives and congressional lawmakers from both major parties as lacking a clear vision and the resources necessary to improve understanding of the potential risks posed by nanomaterials.

The new NRC report, written by a highly regarded team of top U.S. experts, echoes PEN experts' statements, analysis and research since 2005. PEN's work has extensively documented the need for a greatly improved government risk research strategy, more transparency and priority-setting in federal risk research funding, and a new mechanism for coordinating research.

The NRC document states that the NNI strategy "contains conflicting statements about the use of fiscal year 2006 research projects to evaluate research needs."

PEN experts have repeatedly stated that the risk-relevant research investment by the federal government was far less than the figures cited by the Bush administration. Most recently, PEN staff also developed federal risk-research funding options for moving forward (see: www.nanotechproject.org/ehsfunding/).

The new NRC report also echoes PEN's calls for an improved mechanism for conducting research. As many as 18 federal agencies -- including the Defense Department, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration -- are under the umbrella of the NNI's environment and health implications working group, making coordinating research a challenging task.

PEN testimony before the House Committee on Science and Technology

in both 2007 and 2008 provided detailed recommendations for a new mechanism for organizing federal nanotechnology research that would improve coordination among agencies. The principal recommendation is to replace the current bottom-up collection of individual agency research agendas and budgets with a top-down, highly focused and fully-funded strategy that addresses the risk research priorities of a rapidly commercializing new technology.

"The NRC report explicitly says that the federal plan 'does not have the essential elements of a research strategy,'" Rejeski says. "That is – if nothing else – a clear sign that it is time for a new start."

Source: Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies

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