

Congress wants EPA to more quickly regulate unsafe chemicals

September 6 2018, by Ellen Knickmeyer

Republican and Democratic lawmakers pressed the Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday to act faster to bring more of the country's most hazardous industrial chemicals and substances under tighter regulation, saying agency action on the health risks was "bogged down."

The hearing by a House environment subcommittee focused on one of the biggest rapidly emerging health threats to [public water systems](#), a family of widely used industrial coatings now linked to some cancers and to development problems in children, among other [health risks](#).

House members told an EPA official at the hearing about constituents, towns and states scrambling to deal with the discovery of dangerous amounts of the compounds, called perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS.

A federal toxicology agency's finding that some of the compounds were dangerous at much lower doses than previously thought led the Trump administration's EPA to schedule public hearings. But the EPA has declined to say when it might make a decision on whether to declare some of the substances hazardous or otherwise regulate them.

"What is the timeline?" asked Republican Rep. Tom Upton of Michigan, who spoke of one community in his state ordered not to drink its contaminated water for nearly a month this summer.

Upton also held up a previously unreleased report on water tests showing groundwater from a military base at another Michigan city, Battle Creek, bore PFAS levels up to 757 times higher than the EPA's current, advisory-only health maximum.

"How do we create that sense of urgency?" Rep. Debbie Dingell, a Michigan Democrat, asked Peter Grevatt, head of the EPA's office of drinking water. "PFAS in Michigan is scaring people more than the Flint water crisis."

Industries have used the compounds for decades to make nonstick and grease- and water-repellent items.

Testing and peer-reviewed studies of tens of thousands of people in the Ohio River Valley exposed to high levels of a PFAS once used in making Teflon found a probable link with kidney and testicular cancer, ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, hypertension in pregnant women and high cholesterol.

Other recent studies point to immune problems in children, among other problems.

Two varieties of the compounds are no longer in active production in the United States, and the EPA says it will have a proposal ready by the end of the year on how the agency might deal with those.

Grevatt outlined some of the steps under consideration, such as formally declaring the two versions of the compounds as hazardous substances. But he said he did not consider the compounds "the No. 1 challenge we face."

Tens of thousands of other versions of PFAS exist, some of them in wide use.

Jon Corley of the American Chemistry Council said in a statement Thursday that those versions have been "well studied and undergone rigorous regulatory review." However, Andrew Gillespie, associate director of the EPA's National Exposure Research Laboratory, told The Associated Press earlier this year that the agency had not yet carried out adequate reviews to be able to provide "any strong guidance" on risks of the PFAS that U.S. companies are using now.

Who in authority "can tell me if the 16 mystery PFAS I found in the tap water at my children's public school are safe to drink?" North Carolina resident Emily Donovan asked lawmakers at the hearing Thursday. She lives near Cape Fear, where discharges from chemical plants are blamed for high levels of a PFAS known as GenX.

The EPA has said it expects to complete some toxicology work on GenX this month.

More broadly, the subcommittee's Republican chairman, Rep. John Shimkus of Illinois, joined Democrats in faulting the EPA for its handling of 2016 legislation that lawmakers had intended to speed up the agency's long-stalled action on countless other [hazardous substances](#).

Environmental groups, Democratic lawmakers and others accuse Trump's EPA, which includes a former executive of the American Chemistry Council trade group at the agency's chemicals office and which has sought to curb regulation that it sees as burdensome to business, of undermining the 2016 act.

EPA action on it was "bogged down," Shimkus said, saying he would try to arrange a subcommittee hearing on it.

"The whole intent was to get through a process where you don't have things like this," Shimkus said after the hearing, referring to the

emerging PFAS crisis.

"We have a brand-new law that we want administered," he said.

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