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Testing toxic substances

Four years ago, the Council on Environmental Quality warned that hundreds of new chemicals are marketed each year without adequate testing of their effect on health and safety. The Nixon administration responded by introducing a bill to control toxic substances.

Last week, after repeated failures of the House and Senate to agree on a control measure, the CEQ sounded a new note of urgency. Calling for a greatly expanded system of screening chemicals for lethal properties, the council noted that cancer takes 1,000 lives every day in the United States and that between 60 and 90 percent of cancer is authoritatively attributed to environmental causes.

Fortunately, there are signs the long congressional impasse may be ending. Shocked by disclosures relative to the hazards of vinyl chlorides, fluorocarbons, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) and other toxic substances, the public has gained a more sophisticated attitude toward advance warning and protection.

Actually, disagreement in Congress over Senate-passed bills in 1972 and 1973 focused not on the need for controls, but on the amount of authority to grant the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In strong contention has been the extent to which EPA should have the power to order pre-testing of new compounds. A leading industry spokesman argues that "really what we ought to be doing is testing only those things which need to be tested."

But that view sharply contradicts the very purpose of laboratory analysis. As John R. Quarles Jr., deputy EPA administrator, testified last December, "There are important advantages in being able to look across the board at all of these (substances), and then being able to look closely into certain ones that for one technical reason for another raised some warning flag."

Pre-market testing is essential to this legislation. There must be built-in safeguards to protect commercial trade secrets. But EPA ought to have the flexibility to prevent wholesale contamination from happening. A classic example was cited by Russell E. Train, EPA administrator: "There are hundreds of millions of pounds of PCBs out there in the environment — in landfills, soils, and bottom sediments of rivers, lakes and estuaries — which will be there for years, like a delayed-action time bomb, and which we have no way to keep from moving into life systems, including human."

A strong toxic substances law could have prevented such irreversible pollution. It is time to move ahead.