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Toxic substance control

At the risk of oversimplification, the issue before the House this week on the Toxic Substances Control Act is whether we're more interested in killing insects or finding a new wrinkle in meat packaging than we are in protecting humans from chemical contamination.

It doesn't seem especially difficult in these days of advanced science to put together some chemicals to make a super insect killer — Kepone, for example. The problem, as Virginia health officials have discovered, is getting rid of the shakes, the sterilization, or worse, in the workers who come in contact with the stuff.

It isn't too difficult, either, to come up with a substance, such as polyvinyl chloride, that makes swell meat wrappers, subway car liners and many other plastic items in common use. The trick is to keep factory workers from getting cancer while they're handling the substance, to keep subway riders from inhaling the toxic fumes if the car they're in happens to catch fire, and to keep the hamburger consumer from wondering whether the pain in his liver might be polyvinyl chloride related.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, there are today more than 2 million different known chemicals, a list that grows by an estimated 25,000 each year. There are more than 30,000 chemicals in actual commercial production and about 1,000 being added each year; and precious little is known about the effects of most of them on the health of people.

Legislation to put firmer controls over the manufacture of toxic substances has been kicking around in the Congress for five years. Twice the Senate and the House have passed bills but

they died in conference because the two bodies couldn't resolve the differences. The Senate passed a bill again this year and a similar measure is scheduled to come before the House this week.

The bill would give the Environmental Protection Agency authority to require testing of potentially dangerous chemical substances and mixtures if it appears that they may cause or contribute significantly to an unreasonable health risk or if there will be a substantial human or environmental exposure to a substance about which there is inadequate information to determine if it is safe.

The bill would require a manufacturer to give EPA 90 days notice before beginning commercial production of a new chemical or beginning a significant new use of an existing chemical.

If there is reason to believe that an unreasonable risk to health or the environment is involved, EPA can prohibit or limit manufacture, require labeling and specify disposal methods.

If citizens believe EPA is falling down on the job, they could bring suits to require compliance with the legislation. They also could petition EPA to require testing or take action against chemicals believed to be hazardous.

Chemical producers complain that the legislation is unnecessary, inflationary and will stifle progress. That it would place additional burdens and costs on the chemical industry is indisputable, but they are burdens and costs that the industry and the public ought to be willing to accept.

We'd rather err on the side of caution than poison the environment in the name of progress.