

TOP OF THE NEWS

EPA says it pressured 3M over Scotchgard chemical

DAVID BARBOZA NEW YORK TIMES

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The Environmental Protection Agency said Thursday that it had pressed 3M Co. to come up with a solution after the company's own tests had shown that a chemical compound used in Scotchgard products could pose a risk to human health and the environment.

The EPA account differs from that of 3M, which said earlier this week that it had decided to stop making the chemical used in Scotchgard and many other products by the end of the year because the tests showed that the chemical compounds failed to decompose in the environment.

Officials of 3M say they have no evidence that the chemicals pose a long-term threat to human health.

The company said it negotiated with the EPA but its decision was voluntary and there was never a discussion of a recall of the products.

On Tuesday, Charles Reich, 3M's executive vice president for specialty material markets, said, "Our decision to phase out production is based on our principles of responsible environmental management."

The EPA confirmed that the agency had not issued an ultimatum to 3M.

While the EPA said it did not see an immediate safety risk for consumers using products now on the market, agency officials said they grew concerned about potential long-term health risks to humans after a 3M study showed that the chemical, perfluorooctanyl sulfonate, lingered for years in human blood and animal tissue and that high doses were known to kill laboratory rats.

"The results raised a number of concerns," said Stephen Johnson, who works in the office of prevention, pesticides and toxic substances at the EPA.

"What it suggests to us is that there are potentially long-term consequences. But we don't have evidence it is unsafe now."

Officials of 3M, however, say they are absolutely confident that their products are safe, and that there are no long-term con-

sequences to human health.

"This isn't a health issue now, and it won't be a health issue," said Larry Zobel, the medical director at 3M, which is based in Maplewood, Minn.

"To the question of whether this builds up in humans, it would have to be a long time, like hundreds of thousands of years to be a threat," he said.

The EPA said its decision to press 3M rested on four concerns: the compound is persistent in the environment; it appears in wildlife and human tissue around the world; it appears in human blood samples taken from around the world; and, based on the study of laboratory rats, it has the potential to harm humans.

The EPA said it was first alerted to the study of laboratory rats shortly after it was conducted in 1998.

In that study, male and female rats were given doses of the chemical and then mated. When a pregnant rat continued to get regular doses of about 3.2 milligrams per kilogram of body weight, most of the offspring died within four days.

"With all that information, we finally talked to 3M and said that raises a number of concerns. What are you going to do?" said Johnson at the EPA.

There is still a difference of interpretation, however.

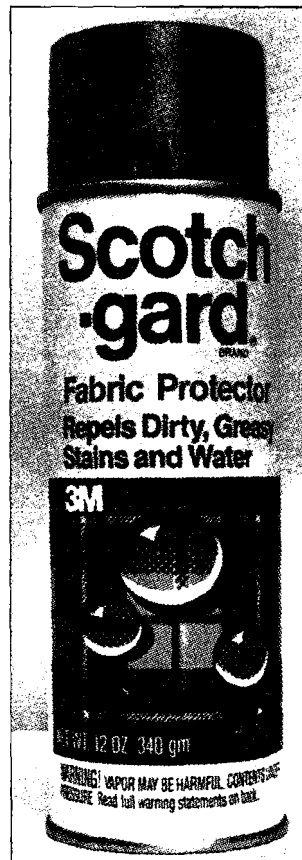
Officials of 3M said the doses given to the rats were extremely high, but EPA officials said that few other chemicals would have as severe an effect.

"This is fairly toxic stuff in rats," one EPA official said. "There's clear evidence it presents a problem in rats."

But 3M said it had not yet determined the cause of death in the rats nor how humans or animals ingested the chemicals so that it appeared in tissue or blood samples.

"That's a very interesting question," Zobel said. "We can't say how it gets into anybody's blood."

As a result of that uncertainty, and the persistence of the compound in the environment, 3M said it would do away with the chemistry by the end of the year.



3M Co. said Tuesday that it would pull some Scotchgard products off the market because of concerns over a key ingredient. EPA officials said they grew concerned about potential long-term health risks to humans after a 3M study showed that the chemical, perfluorooctanyl sulfonate, lingered for years in human blood and animal tissue.