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EPA Probes Widely Used Chemical

By Eric Pianin

The Environmental Protection Agency yesterday launched an expedited investigation of a chemical compound widely used for decades in manufacturing Teflon-coated cookware, water- and stain-resistant clothing, cosmetics and scores of other products, to determine whether it poses a serious health risk to women of childbearing age and young girls.

The chemical, perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), is toxic and persistent in the environment and has been detected in small doses of the bloodstreams of the vast majority of humans tested for it. There has been growing concern about the effects of this compound for several years, but yesterday's announcement suggested the government is taking the problem more seriously and eventually might regulate the chemical.

EPA officials became highly concerned late last year after reviewing a study by 3M, which once manufactured PFOA. It found that laboratory rats exposed to the synthetic chemical lost weight and experienced delayed sexual maturation, and that an inordinate number of their offspring died prematurely.

Now officials say they are conducting the most extensive scientific assessment yet of the perfluorochemical family to determine whether the substances may cause comparable sexual reproductive and developmental damage to women and girls. PFOA has also been linked to testicular, liver and pancreatic cancer in animals, and EPA officials will investigate whether the chemical may be carcinogenic in humans.

"The fact that PFOA is present in humans is of interest and concern to us," said Stephen L. Johnson, assistant administrator of the EPA's Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances. "How the levels in humans do or don't relate to the laboratory animal effects we are seeing is what we're trying to sort out."

Johnson and other EPA officials cautioned, however, that there is much they don't understand about the effects of PFOA, and that the EPA may be many months away from determining whether the chemical poses an unreasonable public risk.

Sensitive to the potential economic effects the investigation could have on the multibillion-dollar perfluorochemical industry, Johnson repeatedly told reporters that "the EPA does not believe there is any reason for consumers to stop using any consumer or industrial related products."

Until recent years, the EPA paid relatively scant attention to the chemical, which is used to produce such world-famous brands as Teflon, Stainmaster, Scotchgard and Gore-Tex, despite environmentalists' warnings that it might eventually rival DDT, PCBs and dioxin as a dangerous global chemical contaminant that is impossible to eradicate.

"The public should have known about problems with this Teflon chemical 30 years ago," said Kris Thayer, senior scientist for the Washington-based Environmental Working Group. "What's outrageous is that the law governing toxic chemicals allows DuPont and other big companies to pollute our blood and environment first, and get around to asking basic scientific questions decades later."

Delaware-based DuPont and three other overseas chemical companies manufacture PFOA, which is used as a processing aid in the manufacture of substances that keep food from sticking to pots and pans, that repels stains on furniture and rugs, and that makes rain roll off coats. Industry makes use of the slippery, heat-stable properties of these chemicals to manufacture everything from airplanes and computers to cell phones, cosmetics and household cleaners.

Yesterday, DuPont reaffirmed its position that there is no evidence indicating adverse human health effects related to low levels of exposure to PFOA.

"We share the EPA's desire to safeguard human health and the environment, and respect the position that there are still questions to be addressed," said Richard Angiullo, vice president and general manager for DuPont Fluoroproducts. "DuPont, along with other companies, has voluntarily committed to EPA to provide the necessary research to help address those questions. We also have led industry in reducing emissions of PFOA."

Manufacturers including DuPont are not required to monitor or report emissions of PFOA or related chemicals into the air, water or landfills because the compound is not regulated under the federal Toxic Substances Control Act.

In May 2000, 3M Co. announced that it would stop making many of its well-known Scotchgard stain-repellent products after finding that one of the chemical compounds used to make the products -- perfluorooctane sulfonate -- persists in the environment and is found widely in the bloodstreams of people worldwide. 3M also stopped manufacturing PFOA, leaving the U.S. market to DuPont.

As part of its action, the EPA formally released a preliminary risk assessment, raising concerns about the potential links between PFOA and reproductive and developmental problems in women. The agency also invited industry groups, environmentalists and other interested parties to help negotiate one or more consent agreements concerning the control of small fluorine-containing synthetic substances called "telomers," which may metabolize or degrade into PFOA.