

Opening Statement
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Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight
Toxic Communities: How EPA's IRIS Program Fails the Public

June 12, 2008

The Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS) process was originally developed for a specific task. Different offices throughout the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) were relying on different assessments of the health effects of chronic exposure to toxic chemicals. IRIS was intended to establish a uniform database within EPA.

Over time, however, IRIS became an authoritative resource on chemical toxicity. Other agencies, states, the international community, and industries increasingly began to rely on IRIS, and the assessments took on increased importance. These outside groups have sought to impact a process that was not initially designed to handle external pressures. The result has been an IRIS process that has effectively broken down.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently issued a scathing condemnation of the current state of the IRIS program. The report's title, *Low Productivity and New Interagency Review Process Limit the Usefulness and Credibility of EPA's Integrated Risk Information System*, accurately sums up GAO's findings. But IRIS' actual production numbers are worse. EPA currently has a backlog of 70 ongoing assessments and has managed to complete only 2 assessments in each of the last 2 years. At the current pace, it will take 35 years for EPA to finish its current backlog.

EPA has attempted to develop a uniform process for IRIS assessments. The agency argues that it can expedite the IRIS process by involving other agencies earlier in the process. While preventing last minute delays is an important reform, the ability of other agencies to extend the timeframe of assessments should be sharply limited. Data gaps in risk assessments will always exist as better science is always developing. EPA needs to limit the timeframe of assessments to prevent other agencies from indefinitely delaying the process.

EPA must balance its need to complete assessments with the rights of interested parties to comment. The best way to achieve this balance would be to give more notice of its assessments. EPA already publishes an annual agenda of the chemical it intends to assess in the Federal Register. If EPA moves the date of that publication forward, providing more notice, interested parties will have a longer period to comment on what they deem to be insufficiencies in the scientific record. During this comment period, EPA can focus on its backlog. Because it offered a comment period, EPA can then fairly limit the ability of outside parties to delay assessments once they are underway. The result would be a more efficient process that preserves taxpayers' money and promotes public health.

I urge EPA to consider these proposals, because IRIS must be fixed. In April, this Subcommittee held a hearing on formaldehyde levels in trailers provided to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. In that hearing, we investigated how the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry struggled to identify the proper "level of concern" for long-term exposure to formaldehyde. EPA determined its formaldehyde assessment was outdated in 1997, but eleven years later, that assessment is still incomplete. These hurricane victims are the real world result of EPA's bureaucratic failures.