CHEMICAL FALLOUT | A JOURNAL SENTINEL WATCHDOG UPDATE

EPA to intensify its study of BPA

Agency to designate it as a 'chemical of concern'

By Meg Kissinger of the Journal Sentinel

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Warning: Chemicals in the packaging, surfaces or contents of many products may cause long-term health effects, including cancers of the breast, brain and testicles; lowered sperm counts, early puberty and other reproductive system defects; diabetes; attention deficit disorder, asthma and autism. **A decade ago, the government promised to test these chemicals. It still hasn't.**

The Environmental Protection Agency announced Monday that it is intensifying its look at how BPA affects the nation's wildlife and water supply and will designate the compound as a "chemical of concern."

The action plan is part of a growing effort by federal regulators to more carefully scrutinize the effects of the chemical. Bisphenol A is found in the lining of most food and beverage cans.

The move by the EPA comes after a three-year investigation by the Journal Sentinel found that government agencies relied heavily on industry scientists to assess BPA's safety, ignoring hundreds of independent studies that found the chemical caused harm.

In February, the Journal Sentinel revealed that eight days after chemical industry lobbyists met with Obama administration officials, the EPA delayed action on regulating the chemical more aggressively.

Lisa Jackson, EPA's top administrator, had said last fall that her agency would be taking a more aggressive approach to regulating chemicals of concern. She repeatedly mentioned BPA among those chemicals.

But when the agency's list of "chemicals of concern" - those that will get the highest scrutiny - came out in late December, BPA was not on it.

At the time, the agency said BPA would be added to the list in two years.

Dale Kemery, EPA spokesman, did not answer questions Monday about why agency administrators changed their minds and added BPA to the list now.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which regulates the chemical's effects in food contact items, reversed its position on BPA. That agency declared it had some concern for the chemical's effects on the brain, behavior and prostates of fetuses, infants and young children.

Five states, including Wisconsin, have banned the chemical's use in baby bottles. The National Institutes of Health announced in October that it would spend $30 million in federal stimulus money to study the chemical's effects.

"We share the FDA's concern about the potential health impacts from BPA," said Steve Owens, assistant administrator of the EPA's Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances. "Both EPA and FDA and many other agencies are moving forward to fully assess the environmental and health impacts to ensure that the full range of BPA's possible impacts are examined."

Environmental advocates praised the move. Spokesmen for the chemical industry downplayed it.

"For the first time ever the EPA is investigating the risks this endocrine-disrupting chemical may pose to the environment. That's very good news," said Alex Formuzis, a spokesman with Environmental Working Group. His organization has been advocating for a ban on BPA in baby products for years.

Cal Dooley, president of the American Chemistry Council, the chemical industry lobby group, said Monday's announcement does not propose any regulatory action regarding human health.

"Numerous studies have found that BPA rapidly biodegrades, does not bioaccumulate and, if detected at all, is present in the environment only at trace levels that do not cause harmful effects," Dooley said.

The EPA will now require chemical makers to give a more thorough accounting, including how much BPA is being produced and where it is used. Manufacturers will be required to provide test data to help federal regulators evaluate its possible impacts, including long-term effects on growth, reproduction and development in aquatic organisms and wildlife.

Some 6 billion pounds of BPA are produced each year, and more than 1 million pounds of BPA are released into the environment each year, according to the EPA.

BPA has come under more intense scrutiny by federal regulators as environmental and health advocates express growing concern that the chemical is a danger to human health. It is used to make hard, clear plastic in thousands of household items, including tableware, some dental sealants, CDs, DVDs and eyeglasses. Scientists say the chemical leaches when it is heated.

Trace amounts of the chemical have been found in 93% of Americans tested.

Hundreds of studies have found that the chemical, which acts like a hormone, can damage cells in lab animals in extremely low doses.