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ENVIRONMENT & PUBLIC WORKS
TRANSPORTATION SAFETY, INFRASTRUCTURE SECURITY, AND WATER QUALITY
SUB-COMMITTEE
HEARING ON
"PHARMACEUTICALS IN THE NATION'S DRINKING WATER: ASSESSING
POTENTIAL RISKS AND ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE"
OPENING STATEMENT
Tuesday, April 15, 2008

Mister Chairman:

Thank you for holding this hearing today.

While we have made considerable strides in cleaning up our Nation's drinking water by significantly reducing large-scale sources of pollution, technological advances in our ability to monitor the concentrations of contaminants in our Nation's waters have led to the some disturbing findings.

Trace amounts of pharmaceuticals, insecticides, herbicides, cleaning products, as well as chemicals associated with perfume fragrances are being found in the drinking water supplies of at least 41 million Americans, according to an investigation by the Associated Press released last month.

Although these chemicals are found at exceedingly low concentrations, typically less than one part in a billion, the bioaccumulative properties of some of the chemicals, suggest that over time, these chemicals may build up in the tissue of aquatic wildlife and humans and pose health risks. As a consequence, even though these chemical concentrations may be sufficiently low to label the levels as "trace" amounts, the repercussions of these compounds on long-term human health remain unclear.

Federal officials continue to investigate the effects on human health of the endocrine disruptors found in water. The effects of these pharmaceutical compounds include possible links to neurological problems in children and increased incidence of some cancers. U.S.G.S. scientists are investigating a wide range of fish health problems in Chesapeake Bay and its watershed.

The Potomac River, which serves as the source of drinking water for millions of people who live, work and visit the National Capitol Region, has had serious problems with fish health in recent years. Several studies of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, including those by scientists of the USGS, have revealed inter-sex fish, a wide range of "abnormalities in which both male and female characteristics are present within the same fish."

According to an August 2007 E-magazine article, the abnormalities include nine male smallmouth bass from the upstream th Potomac River from Washington near

Sharpsburg, Maryland that developed female eggs inside their sex organs. Inter-sex bass were also found in a study three years earlier, after fish kills about 170 miles upstream in the South Branch of the Potomac in Hardy County, West Virginia. The USGS has recently documented the occurrences of these disorders, but its research is in its infancy.

In addition to the examination of samples of fish physical anomalies and fish tissue condition, the USGS is also sampling water chemistry and sediments within the rivers from which the fish samples have been taken. The chemistry includes evaluating concentrations of hormones, pharmaceuticals, personal care products, and pesticides. The concentrations of various chemicals and chemical mixtures may help explain the fish conditions found in the Potomac. Finding the causes of the fish health conditions and what various species of fish respond to, is a complex problem and will take some years to address adequately.

The urgency of the situation was noted by the EPA’s director of America’s water programs, Ben Grumbles, who said, “We recognize it is a growing concern, and we’re taking it very seriously.”

But the Bush Administration budget does not reflect that level of seriousness.

Under the President’s FY2009 budget request, EPA’s budget for Science and Technology faces a cut. In fact, when adjusted for inflation, EPA’s R&D funding would fall to the lowest level in more than two decades in real terms.

And EPA’s budget cuts are not alone.

The U.S. Geological Survey, who has as part of its mission to provide water information that benefits the Nation’s citizens, is also facing major budget cuts.

The USGS Programs that are primarily responsible for providing chemical data to help explain fish conditions are the Toxic Substances Hydrology Program, and the National Water Quality Assessment Program. These two water quality programs are both scheduled for substantial funding reductions or redirections in fiscal year 2009.

Specifically, the USGS National Water-Quality Assessment program will be cut by nearly \$11 million. (-\$10.9 million) – The 2009 budget request for the National Water-Quality Assessment (NAWQA) program is \$54.1 million and 328 FTE, a program decrease of \$10.9 million and 72 FTE from 2008 enacted.

The Toxic Substances Hydrology program is slashed by \$2.8 million in the President’s budget request. That represents a 21 percent reduction in critical funding at a time when our needs are obviously great.

My amendment to the Budget Resolution for FY2009, which Madame Chairman co-sponsored, increased funding for this important research work to move forward.

I look forward to learning more about this serious problem. I hope to hear testimony that explains why the President’s budget priorities do not match with the apparent urgency of this problem. I further want to learn what studies are necessary to better understand the impact of these trace chemicals on not only aquatic life, but humans as well – more specifically, “Who is at greatest potential risk?” and “Is there a coordinated effort between USGS and EPA with HHS to relate the fish abnormalities and chemical concentrations to human impacts?” Finally I’d like to better understand what are the most effective steps citizens, local water treatment facilities, and the Federal government can do to ensure that our drinking water is free of potentially harmful “trace” levels of herbicides, insecticides, hormones, and pharmaceuticals.

Thank you Mister Chairman.

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