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Fw: Scientists Reject Chemical Rules

Subject

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Scientists Reject Chemical Rules
White House Plan to Change Risk Assessment Called
'Flawed'

Subject

Scientists Reject Chemical Rules

White House Plan to Change Risk Assessment Called 'Flawed'

By Rick Weiss

Washington Post Staff Writer

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When the Bush administration last year proposed a controversial revamping of the rules by which federal agencies decide whether chemicals and other products pose risks to human health, it offered to run the plan by the prestigious National Research Council.

Yesterday the White House got its response: a 324-page report that says, in no uncertain terms, "Throw it out and start all over."

The proposal by the Office of Management and Budget is "fundamentally flawed" and should be withdrawn, the report concludes.

Echoing concerns raised by scientists, consumer groups and agency heads, the council -- part of the congressionally chartered National Academies -- told the OMB to limit itself to outlining guiding principles and leave details to experts in the nation's scientific agencies.

John F. Ahearne, director of the ethics program at Sigma Xi, an international scientific honor society, who chaired the review committee, said that in his decades of experience working on such reviews for the National Academies, he could not recall any other instance when the conclusion was to reject a government proposal completely.

"We had expected that we would review the bulletin in detail, then recommend some modifications and improvements," he said. Instead, the 18-member group of experts voted unanimously to recommend that it be killed.

The short but sweeping "draft bulletin" was released last January by the OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), which has enormous control over the extent to which regulated industries must spend money ensuring that their intended actions will not harm the public or the environment.

The research council said it supports the idea of revising current rules. But under the proposed provisions, it concluded, risk assessments would be "more susceptible to being manipulated to achieve a predetermined result."

Among its problems, Ahearne said, the report too narrowly defines an "adverse health effect" as "a fundamental impairment or lesion" -- ignoring the public health goal of preventing, not just responding to, injury and sickness. He said it offers few protections for "sensitive populations" such as children or pregnant women, which usually are key to determining acceptable risk levels.

Consumer activists cheered the report. "The scientific community has rejected this extreme effort to put economists instead of scientists in charge of public health," said Rena Steinzor, a director of the Center for Progressive Reform, an academic think tank that focuses on regulatory issues.

Acting OIRA Administrator Steven D. Aitken, whose predecessor crafted the proposal, said that under the circumstances, the OMB will not finalize the proposed bulletin.