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ASSESSING AND MANAGING THE HEALTH RISKS OF EXISTING SUBSTANCES UNDER THE RENEWED CANADIAN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ACT, 1999 (CEPA 1999)

The Issue

About 23,000 chemicals and other substances were already in use in Canada when the first Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA) was passed in 1988. The Government of Canada must examine these "existing substances" to see if they may pose risks to our health or environment. These assessments are to determine whether or not a substance is considered to be CEPA-toxic.

Background

Environment Canada and Health Canada share responsibility under CEPA to assess and manage threats posed by toxic substances. Environment Canada focuses on risks to the environment, while Health Canada focuses on risks to human health.

CEPA was first passed in 1988, and was renewed in 1999. It acts as a safety net by requiring health and environmental assessments for substances that are not regulated by other federal Acts.

The CEPA Definition of Toxic

Under the Act, a substance is considered CEPA-toxic if it enters or may enter the environment in amounts that may pose a risk to:

- human health
- the environment (such as fish or wildlife)
- the environment upon which life depends (such as water, soil, and air)

Determining if an Existing Substance is CEPA-toxic

CEPA 1999 establishes a framework for Health Canada and Environment Canada's assessment of potential risks posed by existing substances released to the environment, or used in consumer goods or manufacturing processes.

The first step is for Health Canada and Environment Canada to categorize the approximately 23,000 existing substances by September 13, 2006, based on whether they:

- present the greatest potential for human exposure
- are inherently toxic to humans or to non-human organisms and accumulate in living tissue
- are inherently toxic to humans or to non-human organisms and take a long time to break down in the environment

If a substance meets any of the criteria noted above, it is subjected to a screening assessment, which has three possible outcomes:

- The substance is found to be CEPA-toxic. In this case, Health Canada and Environment Canada would take steps to manage its potential health and/or environmental risks.
- The substance is added to the "Priority Substances List" (PSL) and additional, more detailed evaluation is needed. From this point, Health Canada has five years to complete an in-depth assessment of potential health risks to determine whether the substance is CEPA-toxic. Environment Canada has a similar period to determine the environmental impacts.
- The substance is set aside. No further action is required at this time because it is not currently CEPA-toxic.

Assessing the Health Risks of Existing Substances

Health Canada's scientists determine whether an existing substance poses health risks by assessing the potential hazards and exposure. To do this, they examine detailed scientific information about such factors as:

- the health effects a substance may cause
- the level of exposure at which health effects are likely to occur
- the amount of the substance people would likely be exposed to, and the way the exposure would take place – is the substance used in consumer goods, or released into the air, soil, or water?

Managing the Health Risks of Toxic Substances

If an existing substance is found to be CEPA-toxic, Health Canada and Environment Canada manage the risks by imposing appropriate controls on the manufacture, import, use, release into the environment, and/or disposal of the substance. The controls can include restrictions, guidelines, or codes of practice, and can govern the entire life cycle of a substance, including where and how it is produced and used, and the amount that can be produced and used in a given time period.

CEPA-toxic substances considered to pose the greatest threat are those that accumulate in living tissue, remain in the environment for a long time without breaking down, and are the result of human activity. Existing substances that meet these criteria, such as dioxins and PCBs, are slated for "virtual elimination" from the environment.

Need More Info?

For more details about Health Canada's actions to assess and manage the health risks of existing substances, visit <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/exsd/index.htm>

For more information about Environment Canada's approach to assessing existing substances visit <http://www.ec.gc.ca/substances/ese/eng/esehome.cfm>

For other Health Canada links see <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/hecs/index.html>

For more information about the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, visit Environment Canada's Web site at <http://www.ec.gc.ca/CEPARRegistry/Default.cfm>

For a copy of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act go to <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/C-15.31/26784.html>