

Toothless watchdog

by *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Although protecting human health is one of the core objectives of the Environmental Protection Agency, evaluating the safety of chemicals used in products for children apparently isn't a high priority item at the federal agency.

That doesn't make much sense, especially in this consumer-conscious era. A Journal Sentinel investigation revealed that the agency is not evaluating the compounds found in products - such as flame retardants in mattresses and car seats - to determine whether they're harmful to children. Funding for the program, created in the late 1990s by the EPA to do just that, ran out of money last August and is all but dead.

Not that it was much of a watchdog to begin with.

As reporters Susanne Rust and Meg Kissinger learned, the EPA program relied on the same companies that make the chemicals to provide information about the chemicals' potential dangers (www.jsonline.com/733566).

Among other things, Rust and Kissinger found that industry scientists often downplayed the risks their chemicals posed; and when pressed for more information about the chemicals, companies often refused or ignored EPA requests. The EPA could not even say how much was spent on the program over the past eight years, because it didn't have a budget for the program.

Last year, Jay Berkelhamer, then-president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, said in a letter to EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson that the program "had failed to provide the public and pediatricians with timely, useful information." The EPA, he wrote, should consider terminating the program "and replacing it with a mandatory program with stricter deadlines and a more transparent, accountable review program."

He's right.

The EPA's own advisory committee said the program was seriously flawed and called for an overhaul.

Ward Penberthy, the EPA official who oversees the program, said the agency hopes to make improvements soon to speed up and streamline the process. But based on the problems uncovered by the Journal Sentinel, that doesn't go nearly far enough. Especially if the EPA is going to inexplicably continue to rely on the very companies that make the chemicals to basically police themselves.

Reprinted from The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel © CNS.

Toothless watchdog by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel