Message

From: Ramasamy, Santhini [/O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=F078B65256DE4C22A8EC9D9F9720715F-SRAMASAM]
Sent: 7/6/2018 11:39:33 AM
To: Bahadori, Tina [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=7da7967dcafb4c5bbc39c666fee31ec3-Bahadori, Tina]
Subject: RE: Another formaldehyde story

Thank you, Tina.

From: Bahadori, Tina
Sent: Friday, July 06, 2018 7:03 AM
To: Bussard, David <Bussard.David@epa.gov>; Ramasamy, Santhini <Ramasamy.Santhini@epa.gov>; Kraft, Andrew <Kraft.Andrew@epa.gov>; Glenn, Barbara <Glenn.Barbara@epa.gov>; Thayer, Kris <thayer.kris@epa.gov>; Ross, Mary <Ross.Mary@epa.gov>; Jones, Samantha <Jones.Samantha@epa.gov>; Champlin, Anna <Champlin.Anna@epa.gov>; Avery, James <Avery.James@epa.gov>; Soto, Vicki <Soto.Vicki@epa.gov>; Shams, Dahnish <Shams.Dahnish@epa.gov>; Vandenberg, John <Vandenberg.John@epa.gov>
Cc: D'Amico, Louis <DAmico.Louis@epa.gov>
Subject: Another formaldehyde story

https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/06/epa-formaldehyde-warnings-blocked-696628

Sources: EPA blocks warnings on cancer-causing chemical

Burying the formaldehyde study is part of an effort by Pruitt and aides to undermine EPA's research program, current and former officials tell POLITICO.

ANNIE SNIDER07/06/2018 05:07 AM EDT

Interfering with the formaldehyde study is one of several steps Trump's EPA has taken to side with the businesses the agency is supposed to regulate and undermine the agency's approach to science, critics say. | Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP Photo

The Trump administration is suppressing an Environmental Protection Agency report that warns that most Americans inhale enough formaldehyde vapor in the course of daily life to put them at risk of developing leukemia and other ailments, a current and a former agency official told POLITICO.

The warnings are contained in a draft health assessment EPA scientists completed just before Donald Trump became president, according to the officials. They said top advisers to departing Administrator Scott Pruitt are delaying its release as part of a campaign to undermine the agency's independent research into the health risks of toxic chemicals.

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Andrew Wheeler, the No. 2 official at EPA who will be the agency's new acting chief as of Monday, also has a history with the chemical. He was staff director for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in 2004, when his boss, then-Chairman Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.), sought to delay an earlier iteration of the formaldehyde assessment.

Formaldehyde is one of the most commonly used chemicals in the country. Americans are exposed to it through wood composites in cabinets and furniture, as well as air pollution from major refineries. The new assessment would give greater weight to warnings about the chemical's risks and could lead to stricter regulations from the EPA or class-action lawsuits targeting its manufacturers, as frequently occurs after these types of studies are released.

“They’re stonewalling every step of the way,” the current official said, accusing political appointees of interfering with the formaldehyde assessment and other reports on toxic chemicals produced by EPA’s Integrated Risk Information System. Industry has long faulted the IRIS program, the agency’s only independent scientific division evaluating the health risks of toxic chemicals, whose assessments often form the basis for federal and state regulations.

The current official and former official requested anonymity out of fear for their jobs and the impact that speaking out could have on the IRIS program.

Interfering with the formaldehyde study is one of several steps Trump's EPA has taken to side with the businesses the agency is supposed to regulate and undermine the agency's approach to science, critics say. Public health advocates also expressed alarm after Pruitt replaced academic scientists with industry advocates on the agency’s influential science advisory boards and sought to limit the types of human health research the EPA can rely on in rulemakings.

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The officials said Trump appointees have required that career officials receive their permission before beginning the required internal review of the formaldehyde study and have canceled key briefings that would have advanced it. That interference came after EPA career scientists revised the study once already last year to insulate it from political controversy, they said.

In a statement, EPA denied that the assessment was being held back.

“EPA continues to discuss this assessment with our agency program partners and have no further updates to provide at this time," EPA spokeswoman Kelsi Daniell said. “Assessments of this type are often the result of needs for particular rulemakings and undergo an extensive intra-agency and interagency process.”

But as long ago as January, Pruitt told a Senate panel that he believed the draft assessment was complete.

Five months later, it has yet to see the light of day. Meanwhile, internal documents show, a trade group representing businesses that could face new regulations and lawsuits if the study were released had frequent access to top EPA officials and pressed them to either keep it under wraps or change its findings.

“As stated in our meeting, a premature release of a draft assessment … will cause irreparable harm to the companies represented by the Panel and to the many companies and jobs that depend on the broad use of the chemical,” Kimberly Wise White, who leads the American Chemistry Council’s Formaldehyde Panel, wrote in a Jan. 26 letter to top officials at the EPA. The panel represents

companies including Exxon Mobil and the Koch Industries subsidiary Georgia-Pacific Chemicals LLC that could face higher costs from stricter regulations or lawsuits.

Nearly a million jobs "depend on the use of formaldehyde," White's letter argued.

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The holdup is attracting attention on Capitol Hill, where Democrats have already expressed alarm, arguing that the Trump administration has allowed politics to interfere in EPA's scientific assessments of threats such as toxic pollution and climate change.

The agency must "move past politics and focus on its job of protecting human health" by releasing the formaldehyde study, Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) said in a statement to POLITICO.

"Because formaldehyde can be found in everything from wood products to women's hair straighteners, the public health risks are substantial," Markey said. "Delaying the EPA's latest assessment of the health risks of formaldehyde only further endangers the health of Americans."

Public health advocates have similarly expressed fears that the Trump administration has allowed EPA to be captured by the industries it regulates. The revelations about the formaldehyde study come after Pruitt removed academic scientists from the agency's influential science advisory boards and in many cases replaced them with industry advocates, and after he proposed a policy to limit the agency's use of human health data while offering a carve-out for confidential industry studies.

"At every corner, you see the agency trying to either minimize the role of science or manipulate the role of science or just ignore the work of scientists in doing the critical work to ensure that human health and the environment is protected," said Jennifer McPartland, a senior scientist with the Environmental Defense Fund's health program.

POLITICO also reported in May that Trump administration officials, including EPA chief of staff Ryan Jackson, sought to delay an HHS study finding that nonstick chemicals pose health dangers at a lower level than EPA has said is safe.

Insiders anticipate few major policy changes under Wheeler, who is widely expected to continue Pruitt's deregulatory agenda and is well-versed in chemicals issues. He began his career in EPA's chemical safety office, and after leaving Inhofe's staff lobbied for a refrigerants manufacturer that was recently acquired by one of the country's major chemical manufacturers, Chemours Co., a DuPont spinoff.

Decades' of research has linked formaldehyde to nose and throat cancer and respiratory problems, and newer research has suggested the connection to leukemia — controversial conclusions that would gain significant credence if EPA formally adopts them. The new assessment affirms those links to leukemia,

nose and throat cancer and other ailments, according to the current and former officials familiar with its findings.

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The new assessment could lead the EPA to impose stricter regulations of chemicals refineries or wood products and could spur class-action lawsuits from cancer patients attempting to hold companies responsible for their illnesses.

The agency officials said the political aides blocking the assessment include Jackson and Richard Yamada, a former staffer for House Science Chairman Lamar Smith (R-Texas) who is now a top official in EPA's Office of Research and Development. And they said Nancy Beck, who criticized the IRIS program in her previous job as a top chemical industry expert, is now helping to stymie the program's assessments in her new post as head of EPA's chemical safety office. Jackson, Yamada and Beck did not respond to requests for comment.

The EPA spokeswoman disputed the accusations and said Yamada and Jackson have, in fact, requested briefings on the assessment.

The current EPA official told POLITICO that political appointees have managed to avoid creating written evidence of their interference with the formaldehyde assessment by refusing to send emails or create other records that eventually could become public, instead using what the official described as "a children's game of telephone."

By blocking the report at the first step of the IRIS review process, political appointees are keeping it from being reviewed by the National Academies of Sciences, an independent panel of the country's top scientists that must weigh in on all such risk assessments. EPA has already paid the academies $500,000 for that review, the highest level of scrutiny a scientific study can receive, but the work cannot start until Pruitt's aides send the study.

"If the administration was really keen on protecting public health, why wouldn't they send this to the National Academy and give it a really good review?" the former EPA official asked. "If it survives that review, then there's a public health problem that needs to be dealt with, and if it doesn't survive the review, then they can point the finger at IRIS and say, 'You're dead.'"

The former official said there would be only one reason not to ask the country's top experts whether they agree with the analysis: "You don't want the answer."

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Public health advocates say the administration's attacks on science have had especially significant implications for the IRIS program. The small office of about 35 experts pores over the huge body of

existing research on chemicals, including industry-backed studies aimed at proving the substances safe, to independently assess their risks. While purely scientific, the program's reviews are looked to by regulators not just at EPA, but also in the states and around the world, often paving the way for new or more stringent regulations.

But industry has long targeted the program, arguing it uses an opaque process to decide which studies to rely on and which research to give credence to when findings conflict.

The American Chemistry Council, Beck's former employer, spent more than $7 million last year lobbying EPA and Congress on issues including IRIS, formaldehyde and the policy to limit EPA's use of human health research. Chemicals manufacturers, including Hexion, one of the country's largest manufacturers of formaldehyde, have also spent tens of thousands of dollars on lobbying related to the program this year.

A National Academies panel agreed with some of industry's criticisms of the IRIS program in a blistering review of an earlier iteration of the formaldehyde assessment that recommended major changes to how IRIS decides how much weight to give conflicting studies, although it did not attack the substance of its findings about the health effects of formaldehyde. Critics of the IRIS program have pointed to that review frequently as they have sought to kill it, including in an appropriations battle this spring. The EPA spokeswoman also pointed to that assessment in her statement. "The National Academy of Science and Congress in legislative reports have for years been highly critical of EPA's previous assessments involving formaldehyde," she said.

But te EPA has overhauled the program since then, hiring a new director for IRIS and a new head of the National Center for Environmental Assessment, in which it is housed. The changes have received high marks from the National Academies in two more recent reviews, one in 2014 and one this past April. The latest formaldehyde assessment is expected to demonstrate further progress implementing the academies' recommendations, potentially undermining industry critiques of the overall IRIS program if it were to be released.

Although efforts to kill EPA's independent scientific arbiter have so far failed, EPA officials and public health advocates say the program has been significantly hobbled under an administration with close ties to the chemicals industry.

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White, the top staffer for the American Chemistry Council's Formaldehyde Panel, wrote the EPA three times between September 2017 and January 2018, urging the agency to incorporate industry-funded research that found no link between formaldehyde and leukemia, and arguing that the studies shifted the scientific consensus away from the conclusion that it does. In November, Pruitt appointed her to the agency's influential Science Advisory Board.

Less than a week after the council's Jan. 24 meeting with EPA, Pruitt himself confirmed that the report had been complete for months. During a Senate hearing at the end of January, Markey asked Pruitt for an update on the formaldehyde assessment, saying it was his understanding "that the EPA has finalized its conclusion that formaldehyde causes leukemia and other cancers and that [the] completed new assessment is ready to be released for public review, but is being held up."

"You know, my understanding is similar to yours," Pruitt replied, promising to follow up.

Markey reminded Pruitt of the exchange in a May 17 letter. In a response Thursday, the agency's principal deputy assistant administrator for science, Jennifer Orme-Zavaleta, said EPA "continues to discuss the formaldehyde assessment internally and has no further updates to provide at this time."

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