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Chemical safety in question: UC researchers find gaps in regulation for compounds.

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By Ngoc Nguyen

University of California researchers on Friday described gaps in data and safety regulations for tens of thousands of commonplace chemicals.

The costs of that information gap are high in terms of human health, the environment and the economy, the researchers told the staff of members of the Assembly Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee.

The briefing followed release Thursday of "Green Chemistry: Cornerstone to a Sustainable California," a report commissioned by the California Environmental Protection Agency.

It comes amid growing concern over the ubiquity of industrial chemicals in the environment and in human bodies, in light of the dearth of safety testing of these substances.

At the same time, the state is in the early stages of shifting its chemical policy toward development of safer chemicals and processes. In May, the state launched a Green Chemistry Initiative, spearheaded by the state EPA's Department of Toxic Substances Control.

The department is set to deliver a report to the state EPA later this month, detailing options, based on public comments, symposiums and stakeholder meetings.

"California has the opportunity to lead the nation in creating safer substitutes that today's global markets demand, creating new jobs and products," California Environmental Protection Agency Secretary Linda Adams said in a statement.

A 2006 report authored by Michael Wilson at the request of the state Legislature set a framework for a green chemistry policy. Wilson, a UC

Berkeley researcher, said the current system lacks fundamental public health information.

The 2007 report found that low-level synthetic chemicals can disrupt the natural development of infants and children.

Researchers estimate that in 2004, more than 200,000 California workers suffered from chronic diseases linked to workplace exposure to industrial chemicals. In addition, 4,400 people died of those diseases, including cancer, emphysema and Parkinson's disease.

Synthetic compounds also linger in the environment. Plastic is particularly egregious, according to the report. An estimated 6 billion to 9 billion pounds of plastic piled up in the state's landfills in 2003, while only 3 percent was recycled, according to the report.

Based on the state's monitoring, at an expense of \$30 million per year, 72 percent of the state's hazardous waste dump sites leached toxic substances into groundwater.

That's why making safer chemicals from the start is so critical, said the researchers.

John Ulrich, executive director of the Chemical Industry Council of California, said the industry knows it has to change and has already adopted sustainable development policies.

"It's not an overnight on-and-off switch; it's a transition," he said, adding that it could take decades.

"We don't have that kind of time," Wilson said. Other countries, including Canada and the European Union, he said, have implemented comprehensive green chemistry policies.

"If we're not able to do the same thing, we become a market for stuff no one wants to buy," he said.