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Compound in Teflon A 'Likely Carcinogen'

BYLINE: Juliet Eilperin, Washington Post Staff Writer

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The Environmental Protection Agency's own scientific advisory panel has identified perfluorooctanoic acid, a chemical compound used to make Teflon, as a "likely carcinogen" in a report it plans to submit to the agency next month.

The draft report, which EPA posted on its Web site yesterday, is significant because it could prompt agency officials to regulate the processing agent -- known as PFOA or C-8 -- for the first time. Until now, the EPA has classified PFOA as a "suggested" carcinogen, which requires fewer health precautions.

The EPA is in the midst of a major investigation into how the compound, which is used to make stain- and stick-resistant surfaces and materials for products including Gore-Tex fabrics and pizza boxes, gets into consumers' blood and whether it affects their health. It is also seeking millions of dollars in fines from DuPont Co., which makes PFOA in Parkersburg, W.Va., on the grounds that the chemical giant failed for 20 years to report possible health and environmental problems linked to the compound.

The scientific advisory panel, whose 17 members will discuss the draft assessment on July 6 before forwarding it to the agency, does not draw conclusions on whether using products made with PFOA, such as nonstick pans, poses a cancer risk. Instead, it says that the fact that animal studies have identified four different kinds of tumors in both male and female rats and mice that had been exposed to the compound convinced a majority of its members that it is a likely carcinogen.

Environmental Working Group Senior Vice President Richard Wiles, whose advocacy organization has urged the EPA to regulate the compound, called the panel's findings "huge."

"What this report says is they need to take action," Wiles said, adding that officials are now required to conduct a cancer-risk assessment of PFOA. "At least we have a shot now at protecting the public health."

EPA spokeswoman Eryn Witcher said yesterday that she could not comment in detail on how the panel's report would affect the agency's risk-assessment process, but she noted that EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson will take its conclusions into account.

"This administration and Administrator Johnson have focused on ensuring the best scientific data is used in an open process," Witcher said.

DuPont, which settled a class-action lawsuit brought by residents living near its Parkersburg plant last year for \$300 million, has consistently maintained that it has met all federal reporting requirements and that PFOA does not pose a serious health threat. Yesterday, company spokesman R. Clifton Webb said DuPont's studies on its workers suggest that there is no connection between the compound and cancer.

"Based on an evaluation of human health and toxicology studies, DuPont believes that the weight of evidence suggests that PFOA exposure does not cause cancer in humans and does not pose a health risk to the general public," Webb said. "To date, no human health effects are known to be caused by PFOA, even in workers who have significantly higher exposure levels than the general population."