

For Immediate Release
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EPA ANNOUNCES ITS NEW IRIS PROCESS

A New Era for U.S. EPA's Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS)

EPA's Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS) is beginning a new era. The hallmarks of this era will be the highest possible levels of scientific quality and integrity, transparency, and timeliness. EPA plays a critical role in disseminating timely, high quality, and accessible human health risk information on environmental contaminants that may endanger the health of the American public. Central to this aspect of EPA's mission is the IRIS program that provides health effects information on chemicals to which the public is exposed from releases to air, water, and land at contaminated sites, and through use and disposal of products.

Integrated Risk Information System:

IRIS is a database that contains potential adverse human health effects information that may result from chronic (or lifetime) exposure to specific chemical substances found in the environment. The IRIS human health risk information is developed by EPA's IRIS program in the Office of Research and Development. The database contains qualitative and quantitative health effects information for more than 540 chemical substances that may be used to support the first two steps (hazard identification and dose-response evaluation) of the risk assessment process. When supported by available data, the database provides oral reference doses (RfDs) and inhalation reference concentrations (RfCs) for chronic non-cancer health effects, and oral slope factors and inhalation unit risks for carcinogenic effects. Combined with specific exposure information, government and private entities use IRIS to help characterize public health risks of chemical substances in a site-specific situation and thereby support risk management decisions designed to protect public health.

New IRIS Assessment Development Process:

It is of utmost importance that the process used to develop the IRIS risk information, and the resulting assessments posted on IRIS, reflect the highest possible standards for scientific quality and integrity, and provide a timely scientific basis for government actions to protect public health. Since the 1980s when IRIS began, EPA has taken many steps to improve the IRIS process that make it more accessible and transparent, as well as enhancing the independent expert peer review process to assure high quality human health assessments. Recent changes to the IRIS process, however, resulted in an assessment development process that took too long, was redundant, and was not transparent to the public. It also called into question the scientific integrity of the assessments themselves. In January 2009, the U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO) identified EPA's process for assessing and controlling toxic chemicals as one of the three new high risk areas warranting attention by Congress and the executive branch. GAO concluded that, "EPA's ability to protect public health and the environment depends on credible and timely assessments of the risks posed by toxic chemicals," and that a better functioning IRIS program is

“vital to the public’s well being.” To support the President’s strong commitment to transparency and scientific integrity in government decision-making EPA is revising the IRIS process. The new process strengthens EPA’s ability to provide high quality human health risk information to EPA’s Programs and Regions that ensures that the Agency’s actions protect the public health.

Highlights of the New IRIS Process:

The new IRIS process will be managed by EPA. EPA will be responsible for the contents of all IRIS assessments after considering the scientific input of experts at other agencies and White House offices. Importantly, the well established processes of rigorous independent external peer review and public review and comment will remain key components of the new IRIS process. Other highlights of the new IRIS development process include a streamlined review schedule the effect of which will be that the majority of assessments will be posted on IRIS within 2 years of the start date. This will result in more human health assessments being available to EPA’s programs and regions and to other users of the IRIS database. Also, the new process will no longer provide other federal agencies the opportunity to request suspension of an assessment process to conduct research on “mission critical” chemicals. Also, while opportunities remain for input from other federal agencies and White House offices, the input will be from health scientists and will focus on technical comments. Further, all written comments from other federal agencies and White House offices will be made public which will greatly improve the transparency of the process.

IRIS’s Importance to EPA and the American Public:

IRIS assessments provide a scientific foundation for actions to protect public health across EPA’s programs and regions under a broad array of environmental laws. IRIS is also a critical resource for risk assessors and environmental and health professionals in state and local governments and other countries.

IRIS Web site: www.epa.gov/iris