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U.S.

EPA Aims to Label Two ‘Forever Chemicals’ as Hazardous

Emitters could face tighter reporting, cleanup costs if rule is adopted



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The Environmental Protection Agency proposed designating two chemicals used for more than half a century in everything from carpets to cookware as hazardous substances, the latest effort to clean up compounds linked to cancer and other health problems.

The two man-made substances, commonly known as PFOA and PFOS, were used in consumer products under brand names such as Teflon and Scotchgard beginning in the 1950s because of their nonstick and water-repellent qualities. They are part of a class of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, known as “forever chemicals” because they infiltrate people and the environment without breaking down.

Manufacturers in the U.S. have ceased making the two chemicals and turned to others with similar qualities. But PFOA and PFOS have been found in the soil and groundwater of hundreds of communities around the country, near military bases, chemical plants, paper mills and landfills. The chemicals have been found in milk and other food products and have contaminated drinking water.

“Communities have suffered far too long from exposure to these forever chemicals,” EPA Administrator Michael Regan said.

If the rule is finalized, it will trigger increased reporting standards for releases of the two chemicals into the environment and give the EPA more tools under the federal Superfund law to require cleanup, Mr. Regan said. It would also make it easier for the agency to recoup costs from polluters.



The American Chemistry Council, which represents chemical manufacturers, said regulating the chemicals under the Superfund law would be expensive, ineffective and cause delays in remediating sites while there are no uniform standards for how to clean up the chemicals. The association said the designation could impose high costs on state and local governments, water utilities, local fire departments, airports and farmers.

“Now is not the time to propose a rule that will be a significant cost on the treasuries of state and local governments, while the state of science is under development,” the association said.

Environmental groups said the EPA proposal was an important step to helping the agency hold companies responsible for contamination.

“This is going to help kick-start the cleanup process in hundreds of communities that have been devastated by PFAS contamination and will give the EPA new tools to hold companies accountable,” said Melanie Benesh, vice president of government affairs for the Environmental Working Group, an environmental nonprofit.

The EPA said research shows that PFOA and PFOS may present a substantial danger to the environment and that exposure to them may lead to cancer, reproductive, developmental, cardiovascular, liver and immunological effects.

In June, the EPA sharply lowered safe-consumption levels for both PFOA and PFOS by setting health advisory levels for amounts that can barely be detected today.

The levels, while not enforceable, indicate that the agency views the chemicals as being far more hazardous than it had previously. Chemical manufacturer Chemours Co. has since sued the EPA in federal appeals court, arguing that its decision to set a health advisory level for a third PFAS chemical the company uses, known as GenX, wasn't based on sound science.

This fall, the EPA is scheduled to propose drinking-water standards for PFOA and PFOS, setting the first national limits on the chemicals in public drinking-water systems. The agency has also ordered drinking-water systems across the country to test for more than two dozen PFAS chemicals in an effort to learn how prevalent the chemicals are in drinking water.

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