

Senators push EPA for safer water
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Democratic senators sharply criticized the Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday for not moving fast enough to protect the public in the wake of revelations about trace amounts of pharmaceuticals in water supplies across the country.

But an EPA official said there must be evidence that chemicals are dangerous in small quantities before the government starts regulating, and water system managers warned about expensive new mandates with no clear public health benefit.

There was little agreement about the dangers to the public — and no action taken — at a Senate water quality subcommittee hearing called in response to a March report by The Associated Press. That report found traces of pharmaceuticals, including antibiotics, anti-convulsants, mood stabilizers and sex hormones in the water supplies of 41 million Americans, including 850,000 in North Jersey.

"At truly tiny amounts, there are drugs in the water," said Benjamin Grumble, an assistant administrator with the EPA.

But Grumble said the amounts The AP found were comparable to one aspirin tablet in 100 Olympic-sized swimming pools, and the government needs to know if such small amounts are harmful before issuing new regulations.

Still, he conceded the report "does send up a big red flag" and the agency has increased the pace of studies that were already under way.

"We're very concerned," Grumble said.

"Your concern is not comforting, I can tell you that," Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg told him. "Action is what we're trying to get here."

Lautenberg, D-N.J., led the hearing and cited an Environmental Working Group study that found hundreds of chemicals besides drugs, including components of rocket fuel, gasoline additives and pesticides, are getting into water systems because EPA is not regulating them.

Lautenberg called for reversing EPA budget cuts to fund water monitoring programs proposed by President Bush and increasing funding for water treatment and sewage treatment plants.

Many drugs enter the water system through the sewage system, either because people flush old prescriptions away or chemicals pass through their bodies and are not absorbed when medication is taken. Farm animals also are given antibiotics, which enter the water system from their waste.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., chided Grumble for saying the EPA needed more time for studies when it was not complying with a 1996 law that required it to develop guidelines for dealing with the risks posed by hormones in water systems.

"This administration has not followed the law," she said.

The American Water Works Association warned Congress against requiring utilities to provide expensive additional testing and treatment — which customers would end up paying for — without clear scientific evidence of a health benefit.

David Pringle, campaign director for the New Jersey Environmental Federation, said water treatment is still a "Victorian era" process and new methods are needed, especially since industries — including pharmaceutical companies in New Jersey — are now sending their waste to plants built to handle primarily human waste.

"Just because we haven't documented the health effects doesn't mean they're not there," Pringle said.

A pharmaceutical industry spokesman said the quantities of chemicals in water have to be kept in perspective. Someone would ingest less than 20 percent of a single therapeutic dose of medication over 70 years of drinking water, said Alan Goldhammer, deputy vice president of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America.

"The best available evidence today suggests it is unlikely to pose a human health risk," he said. "But we do need to study these issues."