EPA urged to reconsider cancer risks of contaminant

In 2001, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a draft warning about the risks of trichloroethylene, but the document was abandoned.

BY JOHN HEILPRIN
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Growing scientific evidence suggests the most widespread industrial contaminant in drinking water — a solvent used in adhesives, paint and spot removers — can cause cancer in people.

The National Academy of Sciences reported yesterday that a lot more is known about the cancer risks and other health hazards from exposure to trichloroethylene than there was five years ago when the Environmental Protection Agency took steps to regulate it more strictly.

"Armed with the results from the NAS review, EPA will aggressively move forward" on a new risk assessment of the solvent, spokeswoman Jennifer Wood said yesterday. "EPA will determine whether or not to address the drinking water standard once the risk assessment is complete."

TCE, which is also widely used to remove grease from metal parts in airplanes and to clean fuel lines at missile sites, is known to cause cancer in some laboratory animals.

TCE is one of the most common pollutants found in the air, soil and water at U.S. military bases. Until the mid-1970s, it also was used as a surgical anesthetic.

Its report recommends that the EPA revise its assessment of TCE's risks using "currently available data" so no more time is wasted.

That's a step that could lead to stricter regulations. The EPA currently requires limiting TCE to no more than 5 parts per billion parts of drinking water. A stricter regulation could, in turn, force the government to require more thorough cleanups at military and other sites.

A committee of academy experts said "a large body of epidemiologic data is available" on TCE showing the chemical is a possible cause of kidney cancer, reproductive and developmental damage, impaired neurological function and autoimmune disease.

In 2001, EPA issued a draft document saying the risks of TCE causing cancer in humans were higher than previously thought. But that pronouncement was dropped after other federal agencies accused EPA of inflating the risks.

To mediate the issue, the Bush administration asked the academy to study the issue.