

AS EPA TALKS FAIL, ACTIVISTS WILL URGE CONGRESS TO TIGHTEN FLUORIDE LIMITS

Environmentalists and health experts are planning to step up an anti-fluoride campaign by urging Congress to draft legislation tightening EPA's contaminant limits for fluoride in drinking water after their private talks with EPA late last year failed to yield an agreement on stricter standards.

The lobbying effort comes after activists released a statement signed by hundreds of health professionals and scientists supporting stricter standards for fluoride — which could boost pressure to end the practice of adding fluoride, known as fluoridation, to drinking water to prevent tooth decay. The Aug. 9 statement cites recent scientific findings that suggest fluoride may pose serious health risks.

Controversy over fluoridation of drinking water goes back decades, with proponents pointing to its benefits in fighting tooth decay and opponents arguing that it is a toxin and its use in drinking water is equivalent to “poisoning.” Decisions to add fluoride to water are made locally based on recommendations from the U.S. Public Health Service. EPA standards limit the amount of naturally occurring fluoride in drinking water, but activists argue the two issues are linked.

While it remains unclear whether the anti-fluoride plan, in the form of an e-mail campaign initiated by the Fluoride Action Network, will gain any traction among lawmakers, sources involved in it say the effort is necessary after the negotiations with EPA broke down in December 2006.

The e-mail campaign calls for an end to drinking water fluoridation and congressional hearings on the issue, saying the practice “is outdated, unscientific, violates medical ethics and denies freedom of choice. Its serious risks far outweigh its minor (if any) benefits.”

Last year, activists challenged the health tolerances EPA had set for a fluoride-based pesticide in an effort to spur the agency into reevaluating the risk assessment for fluoride and tightening the current 4 milligrams per liter maximum contaminant level goal (MCLG) set for the substance under the Safe Drinking Water Act. The pesticide tolerances were partly based on the fluoride MCLG.

The MCLG is used to set an enforceable exposure drinking water standard, or maximum contaminant level (MCL). Both the MCLG and MCL are currently set at 4 parts per million.

After the release of a 2006 report by the National Research Council (NRC) and other data suggesting many lingering health questions regarding fluoride have yet to be addressed, activists groups argued that the agency's MCLG was an improper basis for the pesticide tolerances.

The NRC report included data indicating fluoride may be linked to decreases in thyroid function, arthritic conditions, bone cancer and other health problems, and called on EPA to revise and tighten its MCLG for naturally occurring fluoride in drinking water.