House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

PACP • NUMBER 013 • 3rd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, May 6, 2010

Chair

The Honourable Shawn Murphy

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Thursday, May 6, 2010

● (0900)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I'd like to call the meeting to order.

On behalf of everyone on the committee, I want to extend to everyone a very warm welcome.

Bienvenue à tous.

This morning, pursuant to the Standing Orders, we are dealing with one of the chapters of the report from the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. It deals with toxic substances, an issue that all Canadians are concerned about, or if they're not, they should be. This is from the commissioner's fall 2009 report.

We're very pleased to have a large number of witnesses with us this morning.

From the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, we have Mr. Scott Vaughan, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. Mr. Vaughan is accompanied by his principal from that office, Jim McKenzie.

From the Department of the Environment, we have Brian Gray, assistant deputy minister. He's accompanied by Cynthia Wright, acting assistant deputy minister; Margaret Kenny, director general, chemical sectors; and George Enei, director general, science and risk assessment.

Finally, from the Department of Health, we have the deputy minister and accounting officer, Glenda Yeates. Ms. Yeates is accompanied by Karen Lloyd, director general, and Athana Mentzelopoulos, director general.

These are the witnesses before us today.

Again, welcome. We're going to ask for opening statements.

I'll call upon you first, Mr. Vaughan. You have up to five minutes.

Mr. Scott Vaughan (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Good morning, Mr. Chair, and thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chairman, we are pleased to be here this morning to discuss the results of chapter 2 of my fall 2009 report entitled “Risks of Toxic Substances”.

In this audit, we examined seven of 85 substances listed as toxic under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. Some of the seven substances we examined are well-known—for example, lead and mercury. Others are newer and less widely known, such as polybrominated diphenyl ethers, or PBDEs, which can be equally hazardous to the health of Canadians. These toxic substances can be found in a range of products from children toys to consumer electronics.

Overall, we found that Health Canada and Environment Canada have put in place or proposed a range of controls—from regulations to pollution prevention plans—that are designed to manage sources of emissions, as well as mitigate the risks associated with exposure to these toxic substances.

● (0905)

[*English*]

We also found that the two departments have been measuring the actual levels of mercury, lead, and other substances found in Canadians. We noted that overall levels of lead and mercury in the blood of Canadians are low and that, in the case of lead, have declined significantly in the past three decades.

Nevertheless, these substances continue to pose risks to those individuals exposed to them. This underscores a key observation of the audit. Despite progress, the risks posed by toxic substances such as lead and mercury still require active management.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chairman, let me highlight four particular areas that represent significant challenges to the departments, as they work to manage and mitigate the risks associated with toxic substances.

The first relates to risk management strategies. While these strategies were in place for five of the seven substances we examined, they are still not in place for lead and mercury.

We recommended that integrated strategies be prepared to manage lead and mercury. We expected that such strategies would examine progress to date, set out clear objectives and priorities to achieve them, and take into account the results of ongoing scientific research. For example, the research assessing whether the level of lead that is currently considered acceptable in blood may, in fact, be too high.

[*English*]

The second issue deals with the capacity of departmental compliance, promotion, and enforcement programs. Environment Canada has put in place an approach to promoting compliance and enforcing policies and regulations that allows it to prioritize its limited resources.

The third point deals with consumer products. The audit notes that, although relatively rare, unacceptable levels of lead in toys and jewellery still pose a risk to those most vulnerable in Canadian society, our children. Other consumer products noted in the chapter include baby soothers and soft vinyl toys that contain phthalates, a substance listed as toxic in 1999 and for which control measures were proposed in 2009.

[*Translation*]

This chapter addressed the issue of consumer product labelling for chronic hazards. Product labels are required to inform consumers of hazards associated with toxic substances, and to provide information, such as safe handling instructions to avoid poisoning.

One question is whether departments should go further, as do some countries under a UN initiative, to inform consumers about chronic hazards such as possible carcinogenicity.

[*English*]

Fourth, we recognize that the federal government is undertaking biomonitoring programs to understand the level of toxic substances found in the bodies of Canadians. Health Canada, with other federal partners, has launched several major studies, such as the Canada Health Measures Survey, to assess the presence of toxic substances in Canadians. The scope of the survey is expected to be expanded to include children from the ages of three to five, while efforts are also under way to conduct biomonitoring of first nations. These are important initiatives that will provide important data needed to understand whether departmental control efforts are actually leading to better health.

Environment Canada and Health Canada have agreed with all our recommendations. Your committee may wish to focus its attention on the adequacy of departmental action plans, the overall approach to managing the risks associated with toxic substances in consumer products, departmental compliance promotion and enforcement efforts, including the capacity to sustain those efforts given the expected growth in toxic substances and related control measures, and plans to respond to information coming from the national biomonitoring programs.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening statements. We will be pleased to answer your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Vaughan. Thanks to all the members of your office for the great work.

We will now hear from Brian Gray, the assistant deputy from the Department of the Environment.

Oh, Cynthia Wright is going to give the presentation. Please go ahead, Ms. Wright.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Environmental Stewardship Branch, Department of the Environment): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

On behalf of Environment Canada, and with my colleagues from Health Canada, I'm pleased to appear before the committee today with the opportunity to address this important chapter.

As you may know, the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, CEPA 1999, is Canada's key piece of environmental legislation governing the assessment and management of chemical substances. Through CEPA, Environment Canada and Health Canada work with partners in other jurisdictions and various stakeholders to protect the health and environment of Canadians.

The complexities of protecting the environment and health of Canadians call for a sound management process. In CEPA, we call this process a cycle, and it is made up of risk assessment, risk management, compliance promotion and enforcement, and research and monitoring.

In the assessment phase, substances such as those reviewed in the audit are scientifically evaluated to identify the risks they may pose to health and the environment. The risk also helps to identify the sources that should then be informing our actions to manage those sources.

Under CEPA 1999, we're fortunate to have a variety of instruments that may be used to take action under risk management to protect the environment and human health in a cost-effective way that takes into account social, economic, and technological factors. Follow-up is then required to ensure that risk management actions are carried out. When non-compliance is a problem, we respond with activities ranging from promoting awareness of the measures required to enforcement, if necessary, and information about compliance is used to help evaluate and in turn improve the CEPA processes and action.

Finally, research, monitoring, and surveillance efforts identify and track the effects of hazards in the environment and associated health implications. This information provides the basis for sound public and environmental health decisions and measures the efficacy of the control measures, thus informing and re-initiating a process in other components of the cycle.

Let me give you the example of mercury, which was addressed in the audit. This is a chemical that has been of concern to the federal government for many years. We have, in fact, been regulating it for over 30 years, now to a point that research and monitoring are showing us that the man-made sources of emissions have been reduced by over 90% since we started taking action.

Risk management started in the late 1960s and focused on mercury levels in fish, as this was, and continues to be, the primary route of Canadians' exposure to mercury. The risk management strategy for mercury concentrations in retail fish was implemented at that period. During the 1970s, our knowledge of the issue advanced, and regulations were put in place under both the Fisheries Act and the Clean Air Act, which is now part of CEPA, to deal with a point source that was related to releases of mercury in water and air from mercury cell plants that manufactured chlorine used to produce PVC.

These steps were only the beginning of our risk management activity on mercury. To date, there are over 20 instruments in place, with a number of other actions planned for the near future, including upcoming new regulations on mercury in products.

We are now at a point at which the real reductions in deposition will require international action, as our research and monitoring programs show that over 95% of mercury deposition in Canada comes from foreign sources. For this reason, Canada is participating actively in the United Nations environmental program to develop a global, legally binding instrument to reduce emissions from all countries.

Our risk management programs continue to evolve. Most recently, the chemicals management plan or CMP was introduced to achieve further goals under CEPA. CMP is jointly administered by Environment Canada and Health Canada and has put Canada in the forefront in assessing and managing the risks associated with substances that are used in many industrial sectors and consumer products brought into commerce prior to our modern regime of assessing new substances.

When the CMP was launched in 2006, we completed a triage of the 23,000 existing chemicals that had not yet been assessed under the more modern regime and identified 4,300 of the substances for further action. Since then, we've published over 120 assessments, which cover nearly 1,300 substances. Final conclusions are being completed for 100 high-priority substances, with action already initiated on 31 of these.

● (0910)

Our commitment to risk management strategies is reflected in the CMP, in which the strategies are central tools for setting meaningful objectives as well as monitoring and reporting progress.

Chemicals management is an ongoing process. As progress is made in assessing, monitoring, and managing substances, we continue to refine our efforts to protect the environment and the health of Canadians from these harmful substances.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Wright.

We're now going to hear from the Department of Health, and Ms. Yeates, the deputy minister.

Ms. Glenda Yeates (Deputy Minister, Department of Health): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, it is a pleasure to be here today to discuss the report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development.

[*English*]

It's a great pleasure to be here and we'd like to thank the commissioner for his comments with respect to the department.

This is my first opportunity as the Deputy Minister of Health to appear before your committee, and I am very happy that it's on a topic that is of such importance to Canadians.

● (0915)

[*Translation*]

Health Canada is committed to protecting the health and safety of Canadians and takes very seriously its responsibility to manage substances that are harmful to human health.

Health Canada and Environment Canada already have extensive risk management policies in place to address the risks from many harmful substances, including lead and mercury. While these strategies were not in the consolidated from we now use, risk management actions for lead and mercury have been developed, implemented and monitored. We also monitor their effectiveness.

[*English*]

Decades ago, lead was identified as a dangerous substance. Over the last 40 years, the Government of Canada has introduced a number of initiatives to reduce exposure, and we've seen the levels of lead in the blood of Canadians drop dramatically. In fact, this is often cited in the public health field as a major success story. During that time Canada has also reduced its man-made mercury emissions by 90%, as my colleague from the Department of the Environment noted.

But we continue to want to move forward in protecting Canadians by implementing a solid chemicals management plan, one that is based on very sound and thorough science. This is a plan that assesses and manages the risks of chemical substances to human health and the environment.

As part of this plan, we set out to assess 200 of the highest-priority substances by 2011 and introduce whatever risk management would be required. I'm pleased to report to the committee that we are on schedule, having already completed final assessments for 120 of the substances on that list.

Just to put this in some perspective, we have accelerated our risk assessments from roughly 70 substances over 18 years to, rather, 70 substances every year. As I mentioned, we're on schedule, then, to complete the targeted assessments by 2011.

[*Translation*]

Health Canada continues to conduct research that gives us insight into the hazards associated with other chemicals and guides the way we monitor their impact on human health.

Our own assessments of the risks of Bisphenol A lead to Canada becoming the first country in the world to ban baby bottles made with that chemical. Canada was also the first country in the world to limit lead in children's jewelry, and we have some of the most stringent lead limits in the world.

[*English*]

We continue to monitor new scientific information on chemicals to determine whether additional action is needed. As recognized in the audit, we are currently doing this for lead. As we revise our risk management strategy, we will implement the commissioner's recommendation to develop a comprehensive and consolidated description of all of our actions and progress to date and outline any remaining actions and timelines.

With respect to the observation in the report about the labelling of consumer products, we were very thoughtful and focused on the fact that one of the three pillars of our approach to regulation is active prevention. This reinforces the notion that an informed consumer is in fact an integral part in the assurance of safety of consumer products. To that end, we recognize that labelling is one of a number of tools in the regulatory tool kit. However, there is still significant debate around the world about how and when to use this tool most effectively.

When the labelling issue was debated by a committee of the House of Commons when it was examining the former Bill C-6, the proposed Canada Consumer Product Safety Act, it was agreed that there was no simple solution. But the bill was then consequently amended to include the creation of an advisory committee which, among other things, would provide advice on issues such as labelling. Having an advisory committee that would consider and give us expert advice on labelling could supplement the work that we are already doing within the department with respect to chemicals that are used by consumers and chemicals that are used in the workplace.

[*Translation*]

Finally, I can assure the Committee that Health Canada collaborates effectively with Environment Canada. Scientists and managers from both departments jointly develop risk-management strategies to protect both human health and the environment.

[*English*]

As such, we are implementing the recommendations found in the report of the Commissioner of the Environment, and I would like to assure all members of the committee that Health Canada is committed to continuing to work with Environment Canada to enhance our risk management strategies and to monitor their performance.

Thank you very much.

Merci.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Yeates.

We're now going to start the first round of questions of seven minutes each.

Monsieur Dion, pour sept minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning to all our witnesses. Thank you for being with us today.

The subject of today's meeting is extremely important in terms of the health of Canadians and of our environment—namely, the toxic substances that are released into the air and which may affect us in all kinds of ways.

Over the decades, the news has been fairly positive. According to the report, in the 1970s—when we were all still wearing short pants—one quarter of Canadians had lead levels that were too high. Now, that has been reduced to 1%. You mentioned that human-caused mercury emissions had declined by 90%. I suppose you are referring there to human activities in Canada, and mercury sources from abroad are on the rise. You can correct me if I am wrong, but I don't think so.

That is very positive; at the same time, we must not be complacent. We have to look at that report very carefully. This is too important an issue. I am certain my colleagues have lots of questions, so I will ask mine right away.

The report is critical of the two departments with respects to the lack of a comprehensive report on lead and mercury. In your presentations, you did not respond to that criticism. However, on page 16 of the French version of the report, it says that Health Canada has announced a comprehensive lead assessment by means of consultations expected to take place in mid-2010—and we are almost there. Environment Canada was also planning to publish an integrated mercury study by the winter of 2009-2010—which has already gone by.

Could I ask officials from those two departments what the status of that is? Have they filled the gaps mentioned in the Commissioner's report?

● (0920)

[*English*]

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you very much for the question.

[*Translation*]

We are currently conducting a toxicological assessment for lead.

[*English*]

We have been working on this for approximately 18 months. We are anticipating that it will be released this current year, 2010, so we are on schedule to release it in that timeframe. Once we've released the toxicological assessment, the reassessment, which takes into account all of the latest scientific information from around the world on lead, we will be in a position to take the appropriate measures that follow from that assessment.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So you think that at that time you will be able to say you are responding adequately to what the report is asking you to do?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Yes, we do.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Thank you for your question. Just to give you an idea of the context, I think it's important to mention that risk management strategies are a new tool that we now use every time we evaluate a substance.

[*English*]

So it's a new procedure that we have in place and we're very proud that it's in place. It's now becoming a model for the government that when a risk is assessed, a strategy is put in place to measure progress. That's something that we do systematically for all substances now.

For mercury, we have many strategies already in place. As the commissioner noted, though, we didn't have one document that knitted them altogether. So the first thing we did was to look at our website, which is where Canadians often go for information. I'm now very pleased to say that on our website you can enter "mercury" and see the existing 20 measures that are in place; you can see the context of what the sources are and how they're being managed; and it also describes the measures that we have under way, including international action, because, as we noted, international action is now an extremely important factor in reducing Canadians' exposure to mercury.

Our next step is to knit all of these together in a document that would be publicly available, both on the web and in hard copy. So we, too, feel that we're on track to address this gap that the commissioner noted in terms of being able to communicate effectively to Canadians what's in place and what's still to come.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: May I ask the commissioner, is it what you had in mind?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you.

Yes, we pointed out.... I think what both witnesses have said is the importance of pulling together into one package a diverse series of control and other measures, as I think the Environment Canada representative said...to knit it together to see in one consolidated picture.... So yes, sir, and I think from that there would be benefits in terms of looking to see if there are gaps and whether or not those gaps could be identified once everything is in a consolidated picture.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Could I now move on to another very important issue that is addressed in the report—labelling. The report says: "While labelling of chemical products in the workplace is required to indicate the hazards of chronic use, no similar requirement exists for certain consumer products where multiple or long-term use may pose chronic hazards." One may wonder why there would be less stringent requirements to protect consumers than there are to protect workers. Those products even include some children's toys.

Could I ask the Commissioner why no recommendation was made on the important issue of labelling?

● (0925)

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you for the question.

First of all, as you underscore and as the witnesses have said, the issue of labelling has long been discussed, and we've noted where we thought the state of debate is at the moment. Part of that, as one of the witnesses said, is that there's still an outstanding debate between the issue of chronic and acute and how effective they are.

It would seem to us that we did not and would not enter into what seems a policy discussion on where that will finally land. However, we did also note at the international level some countries have adopted labelling under a UN initiative and that the evidence we had on that particular issue was that Canada wanted to harmonize its efforts with those of the United States.

On the specific issue of lead in toys and lead in products more generally, from our understanding of the history, there were various attempts to enter into voluntary agreements with industry, including with partners from outside Canada, from the import side, and that the label then was one of the options the departments had looked at. In the end, they decided to settle on an acceptable threshold, after which any product which exceeded that threshold would be an unacceptable or illegal product, essentially.

Finally, on why we did not make the recommendation, when were doing this audit, Bill C-6 was still very much in discussion, and we didn't move forward given the context of the Bill C-6 discussions.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dion.

Ms. Faille, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): With respect to management of mercury emissions, along the same lines as Mr. Dion's questions, in paragraphs 2.34 and 2.35 of your report, you say that a regulation pertaining to the release of mercury from consumer products was proposed in 2007, but has not yet been implemented.

Can you tell us what is preventing the implementation of this legislation?

[*English*]

Ms. Glenda Yeates: In terms of risk management actions on mercury, we are working very much with our colleagues in the Department of the Environment on the mercury issues. The updating of the regulations is something we are continuing to work on, and I may ask one of my colleagues to address...I think it will be the Department of the Environment that addresses this issue.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: We have a number of instruments either in place or under development dealing with mercury in products. We are working on regulations that would prohibit the manufacture, import, and sale of products containing mercury except for essential uses, and in those areas limits would be set. We would envision labelling on those products what the limits are and reporting in terms of their use and manufacture.

There are other areas where we are putting in what we call pollution prevention plans. I mentioned that the Canadian Environmental Protection Act has a number of instruments we can use. We have recently published a notice on dealing with mercury in—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Yes, but my question was: what are the obstacles preventing you from implementing it? This is mentioned in paragraph 2.34 of your report.

[*English*]

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: As I am saying, the regulation is still under development. I don't think there are really obstacles to implementing it. This is one of our first product regulations under CEPA, and the work is going well. It is a new area for us, to be regulating products under CEPA, and we are using other tools as well to complement it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Do you have a timeline? There is no mention of that in your action plan.

[*English*]

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: We are expecting it later this year, in 2010, probably towards the early fall, I would expect.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: In the fall?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Yes.

Ms. Meili Faille: So, we can expect to see the regulation in September or October?

● (0930)

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Yes.

Ms. Meili Faille: In your statement this morning, you said that Health Canada will have assessed 200 of the highest priority substances by 2011. I imagine you already have specific measures in mind.

Can you give us an idea of what you have found, and what steps you are planning to take based on your observations?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

We have, as I mentioned, undertaken this work. It has resulted in some chemicals having been declared to need further work and further risk management plans; in other cases, that was found not to be the case. I will ask my colleague, Karen Lloyd, who is the director general of the safe environments directorate, to speak further to some of the details of the findings on those chemicals.

Mrs. Karen Lloyd (Director General, Safe Environments Directorate, Department of Health): Thank you.

To respond, concerning the 200 high-priority chemicals we're currently assessing, the way the process works is that we do the risk assessment, we consult on it, and we conclude on the risk assessment. When the assessments come out, we then start the conversations with stakeholders on steps we would take to manage the risks. Now that the final assessments are coming out, we're getting into serious discussions of what to do with most of them. The only one that action has been firmly taken on so far is the bisphenol A, with a ban of the baby bottles. All of the others are still under discussion.

Many of them, if they are used in cosmetic products, will be added to the cosmetic ingredient hot list, so that they'll be prohibited, or certain uses of that substance will be prohibited, in cosmetics. In the case of others, we're using a control that would mean the substance could not come back into Canada for any future uses or in any greater volumes without informing us of that, so that we can assess the use so that exposure to the chemicals does not increase over time. In other cases, regulations will be developed to decrease releases into the environment.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Can you name some of the chemicals you have assessed?

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: Well, there have been several. There have been several—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Well, at least one of the 200 substances you have assessed this year.

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: That's right.

Bisphenol A is—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Other than that one?

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: There has been bisphenol A, there have been a few phthalates, there have been several siloxanes....

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: If you cannot name them right now, perhaps you could forward a list to us.

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Yes.

Ms. Meili Faille: I believe Mr. George Enei wanted—

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll come back to him in a minute, but I want to clarify the undertaking. You are going to get a list of the ones that you have analyzed and present it to the committee, is that correct? Is two weeks...?

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: Yes, that's right, and all of that information is on our website.

The Chair: Two weeks is fine?

Okay.

Mr. Enei.

Mr. George Enei (Director General, Sciences and Risk Assessment, Department of the Environment): Thank you Mr. Chair. I was going to reinforce the message that Karen Lloyd has just indicated: the information is available on our website.

The 200 chemicals are generally a cross-section of pigments, dyes, and surfactants. They're used in a multitude of sectors as lubricants, in cosmetics, and personal care products, the full gamut, if you will, of what society needs on a daily basis. Those chemicals are being processed, if you will, through the CEPA life cycle that Cynthia Wright mentioned earlier in terms of proceeding through assessment. If there is a concern identified, they move into the risk management stage.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: You can provide me with all the details and names of the substances, because I am a chemical engineer by training. I am well acquainted with them.

Do I have any time left?

[*English*]

The Chair: No. I'm sorry. Your time is up.

Merci, Madame Faille.

Mr. Christopherson, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thanks to all of you for your attendance.

Commissioner, I have a question process-wise. I'm unclear.... The environment committee...do they hold similar hearings on your chapters, like we do?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Well, I've been here for two years now, and so far, no. We're looking forward to them doing similar work to this. Just to underscore, we're extremely grateful and pleased to be here to provide this type of management oversight on the questions that we raise in our chapters.

Mr. David Christopherson: I appreciate that. That's the reason I'm raising it. It's not your issue; it's for us as parliamentarians to deal with.

But that's the reason you're in here with us doing this. It was our understanding that it was not being done at the other committee, which I think is surprising. Hopefully they'll start the process, because really, the other half of the work you do when you do an audit is to pick it up, analyze it, and say, "Where do we go from here?" That's the role of our committee.

It seems to me that the environment committee ought to be doing the same. Anyway, that's for internal matters, and we'll deal with that later.

I want to say that I was very struck by the fact that we seem to be in a world where, if somebody mentions national security, that can lead us all the way to a potential constitutional crisis in terms of its importance. And if we're dealing with the police or our firefighters and all of our front line emergency response folks, there's never enough we can do, but when it comes to the slow poisoning of Canadians, we don't take that with the same seriousness at all.

I have to say to the deputies who are represented here today that I am not impressed at all. I am not in the least bit impressed with the track record of your ministries on these issues and with your statements today. In particular, in the one from the deputy Minister of Environment, there was nothing in there that really spoke to these issues, as far as I'm concerned. It was just a piece of fluff.

Here's why I'm so upset. We're talking about our kids in many cases and their exposure to toxic substances. So we're going to prevent bombs going off in their schoolyard, but it's okay to let them get poisoned.

And this is not new. This is when I really get cranked. We can go back to 1999 to an audit that was done. I'm quoting from the commissioner's audit report in front of us, the 1999 report, which found, "The chapters raised concerns regarding the federal government's lack of progress in developing and implementing risk management strategies". In 2002, a follow-up report was done, and it said in part, concluding, "Although the federal government had made some progress...its ability to detect, understand, and prevent the harmful effects of toxic substances was still limited".

So we had an audit that found the problem, then we had another audit that came three years later and said there was still an ongoing problem, and now, today, we have the Commissioner of the Environment in front of us and he's saying in his opening remarks today, in part, "This underscores a key observation of the audit..."—meaning this one, the third one—"the risks posed by toxic substances such as lead and mercury still require active management." Further, in paragraph 8, he says, "The first relates to risk management strategies".

So I want to know what's going on. It has been raised now in three audits that risk management, in terms of the exposure of our citizens to these substances, is still not being managed adequately. I didn't hear answers from these two deputies, Chair, that gave me any satisfaction that these matters are in hand.

I'm going to give the two deputies an opportunity to respond. But I really am very disappointed and worried, and that's why I'm so upset. It's because it's about our kids, in large part.

Anyway, that's my bit. I want to try to be as fair as I can and give you a chance to respond.

● (0935)

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you for the observation. At Health Canada, we certainly share the passion and concern for protecting Canadians.

We feel that we have made significant progress. We actually believe that there are a number of steps that have been taken and appreciate the commissioner's comments about the progress that has been made since the last audits that you referenced.

With the investments that we've had to move forward on the risk assessments in a much more methodical, and paced, and deadline sort of way, the pace has augmented significantly, as I mentioned. There has been a significant investment of dollars and we have moved through the list of chemicals in this triaged way very significantly. We recognize that there is much more to be done, but we have been working to work through along the schedule that has been outlined.

With regard to the lack of a risk management strategy for lead and mercury, I think the commissioner noted that in fact there are many individual strategies that have been taken, and in fact there have been steps taken to monitor the efficacy of these strategies. I think we are gratified that we in fact can see some of the positive results from the biomonitoring and other methods that we've taken to actually measure our 20 regulatory regimes, for example, in lead or mercury, to ask if they are producing results.

I think the commissioner makes a very good point, in that in fact it would be advantageous—and we agree with this recommendation—to pull together all of those individual mechanisms, or individual regulatory steps that have been taken over the years, into one risk management strategy. In a sense, because lead and mercury have been known challenges for such a long time and we've been going through the process of addressing those, over decades essentially, they were not brought together in the same way that we're using for the modern chemicals, in a coordinated risk-assessment way.

So there are two points I would make. One is that on the newer chemicals, we are doing this in a consolidated risk-assessment way, and for the older chemicals, lead and mercury, we believe there is a series of very effective measures, but we also agree with the recommendation to pull those together.

The last point I would make is that we continue to want to move forward with updated legislation, for example, such as the proposed Canada Consumer Products Safety Act. We continue to want to push the envelope to update the tools that we have to keep Canadians safe and we're very dedicated to that. Thank you.

● (0940)

The Chair: Do you have a response?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Yes, and I'm sorry my remarks didn't give you enough information in terms of explaining what we are doing today. My colleague mentioned that we do have a significant investment that the government has made in accelerating the assessment and management of substances that came into commerce before the modern regime.

The modern regime started in 1994, so since that time, no chemical is manufactured, imported, or put into use in Canada without a risk assessment and appropriate control instruments as needed—or in fact banned and prevented from coming into Canada.

So under this audit, we're dealing mostly with the legacy of the past. Canada is the first country to deal with this. It's just starting in Europe. It is under discussion in the United States. In 2007, the government invested $300 million over four years to start this process. We're expecting it to be completed by 2020. We'll be the first to complete it if we make that target objective.

We're well on track, as my colleague mentioned. This is a large volume of work, but I have some happy news. For many of these substances we're finding in fact.... Our list that we're working from, the 23,000 that we assessed and found that 4,300 needed further work, in fact, of that 4,300, many are no longer in commerce. Industry is getting the message and they've been getting the message since 1994 with the regulations that prevent these kinds of substances coming into the market.

So we have a program to deal with the legacy of the past. We're well on track to meet it. I would just mention we've also invested in enforcement. The penalties are much higher as well, as a result of the new enforcement bill that was passed last year and further investments in compliance and enforcement.

With respect to mercury, as I said, we have over 20 instruments in place that we're monitoring just to make sure they're working. We also have a number of instruments that were under development, including those dealing with products. We have further work that is being assessed as our research and monitoring continue to identify problems. We're actively working with other countries, recognizing that 95% of the source in Canada is not from Canada. It's coming largely from Asia, the United States, and other countries.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I understand, Mr. Vaughan, that you have a comment.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Yes, I do, Mr. Chair. It's just to point out that in 2008 we noted that there has been satisfactory progress on the risk assessment side. I think, as the honourable member had noted, in previous audits we had noted that there were delays, that things weren't moving forward as quickly as they should.

I think the assessment process, which we didn't look at in this audit, partly because of the findings from 2008, found that not only was there satisfactory progress, but that the chemical management plan represents, not only for stakeholders within Canada but for many international partners, a model of how to undertake thousands of complex assessments, do that in an expeditious way, and then be able to move to the control mechanisms that are needed once they are determined to be toxic.

On the assessment side, I think, Chair, that there are some important and positive findings on what Health Canada and Environment Canada have been doing.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Saxton, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Andrew Saxton (North Vancouver, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first questions are for the commissioner. In your opening remarks, you mentioned that Health Canada and Environment Canada prepared risk management strategies for five of the seven toxic substances. I believe the report actually says four, but in your opening remarks you mentioned five.

How have these strategies helped to improve results and what have we learned from the development of these strategies that will help us in the development of strategies for mercury and lead?

● (0945)

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Chair, thank you very much.

The member is right. There was a fifth substance for which the department considered there to be something comparable to a risk management strategy, and that is why we increased it to five.

I think there have been lessons learned. I think our colleagues from the departments would be better placed to discuss this, but what we have said, and I think what your committee looks at, is that in all federal management practices,we have to set out a coherent strategy on what we want to do, when we're going to get there, what the means are to get there, and how we know whether or not we're succeeding. That then builds some internal synergies and internal logic in order to build success, to measure success, to figure out if there are gaps, and to close the gaps.

As a point of general management practices, we have repeatedly found, through the Office of the Auditor General, that taking these basic management approaches is helpful to get better results.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

In your report, Commissioner, you illustrated the process of managing risks for toxic substances, and your diagram illustrates it. Can you walk us through that diagram, please? That's on page 7 and is exhibit 2.1.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you, sir.

I'll ask my colleague, Jim McKenzie, to go into more detail. But essentially what we noted in those paragraphs between 2.8 and 2.11 are sort of the basic foundations on managing. The beginning part is what we just discussed: the assessment or evaluation process. What is the process by which you can determine whether a given substance falls within a toxic categorization?

Then, from that—and this is very much what this audit is about—once that evaluation has taken place and a substance has or has not been determined to be toxic, the second point is whether a risk management strategy should be put in place to provide some internal logic on the management practices.

The third one is implementation. By then, you learn by doing what is working in the implementation. Finally, there is evaluation. After all these mechanisms are in place, do you know if they're working?

Finally, on that last point, just to underscore the opening statement, I think the national biomonitoring programs are an absolutely critical and important part of that evaluation loop to see whether or not these are working and measuring the levels in Canadians.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you, Commissioner.

My next question is for the Deputy Minister of Health. In your opening remarks, you mentioned, and I quote, that “we have accelerated our risk assessments from...70 substances in 18 years to...70 substances every year”. That's a remarkable increase. I'd just like to ask you how you have achieved this.

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you very much for the question.

I think it is part of the overall management approach, which the commissioner just spoke to, of setting out a very specific schedule of how we are going to address this very long list of thousands of chemicals. It was also made possible with the investment that was made in the chemicals management plan: the $300,000 million over four years, of which $193 million is allocated to Health Canada and the remainder to Environment Canada.

That has given us additional funding to target towards these risk assessments. Part of that funding is also for the other components of the life cycle approach, which the commissioner and my colleague from Environment Canada spoke about: for the risk management part of the process and the research, which is needed to make sure we are keeping abreast of the latest information worldwide, and for monitoring and surveillance, which are ongoing and important parts, including the biomonitoring, which we think is critical.

Then there is the money for the overall pulling together of those strategies. Those investments have made this significant acceleration possible.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you very much.

My next question is for Environment Canada. On page 5, paragraph 2.2 of the report states, and I quote:

> Assessing the risks of toxic substances, including the hazards they present and routes of exposure, and managing those risks is a complex process involving multiple actors (international organizations; federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments; academia; industry; and the non-profit sector).

Can you elaborate on the involvement of each of these actors and what role they play in managing the risks of these toxic substances?

● (0950)

Dr. Brian Gray (Assistant Deputy Minister, Science and Technology Branch, Department of the Environment): I'll start trying to answer your question by addressing that we've identified essentially seven mechanisms for informing our risk assessment process. The seven mechanisms are the categorization process we've already discussed that was taking a look at the 23,000 substances in commerce and screening that down to the 4,300 we believe might pose a risk to humans or the environment.

As my colleagues have already mentioned, for any new substance that would enter the marketplace we already have a very good process in place under the new substance notification. A new substance cannot enter into commerce in Canada without the risk assessment process.

In addition to the categorization I just mentioned, we have industry submissions through CEPA. We have provincial and international decisions that we monitor to keep abreast of what other countries are doing, not only in their assessments but in their management plans. We have public nominations under CEPA; if anybody from the public has a concern about a substance in commerce, there is a process to bring that to our attention, and we must respond to that.

I've mentioned the new substances notification process. Also, we have emerging science and international assessments, which I partially touched on, whereby our scientists, risk assessors, and risk managers are constantly keeping abreast of what other countries are doing, both on the science side and on the management side.

Finally, and very important—at least for my branch in science and technology—we do data collection; that is, we have biomonitoring programs whereby we're looking at water, wildlife, and fish, but we also have research programs. Under chemical management plans, we have a very good process in place to identify substances that we think might be of concern, and we conduct research on those to try to better understand the fate of these substances in the environment or their actual harm to animal life or environmental conditions.

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Thank you.

My next question is also for Environment Canada. I recognize that there are various ways of dealing with toxic substances. Can you discuss the differences between how you are implementing a risk management strategy for lead and one for mercury, as you highlight in your management action plan?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Certainly. As we mentioned, the risk management strategy pulls together the risks and sources of a problem and how we should deal with them.

In the area of mercury, the original sources dealt with were large industrial emitters. Since that time, having many of those sources closed off, we are now looking at other sources, and many of those are in products. We have a pollution prevention plan dealing with mercury in lamps. We have measures coming into place—sorry, that's on switches. We have measures with provinces on lamps, and we're doing work on dental amalgam, which is another source that can get directly into the water. It's a very easy solution to deal with.

The risk management strategy sets out what you're trying to achieve and what are the major sources. We're using a mix of regulations, codes of practice, instruments with the provinces, pollution prevention plans—a number of different tools to deal with those.

The monitoring and release information informs us of whether there are ongoing sources that we need to deal with. In this case, it's the research is pointed to sources outside Canada, largely from Asia and other countries like the United States as well.

That is what has taken us into dealing with the United Nations Environment Programme to work on a legally binding instrument that would deal with sources from all countries. It would also help to deal with the fact that products may be manufactured offshore, not in Canada, and imported into Canada. It's very difficult to deal with it once it comes into Canada. It's sometimes difficult to know what the content is.

So it's very important to deal with countries, particularly in Asia, with its big manufacturers, to send the signal that mercury has to be eliminated except for essential products and that in those essential products it needs to be controlled to a certain limit, with labels as to what that limit is.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Saxton.

We're now going to go to the second round of five minutes. We're going to start with Mr. Lee.

Mr. Lee, you have five minutes.

● (0955)

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): Thank you.

I'd like to focus my questioning on filing complaints. I believe this was referred to in chapter 1 of the environment commissioner's report. My questioning is directed to the Department of the Environment, whichever one of the witnesses wishes to speak for it.

Under section 342 of the statute, the department is required to make a report annually to Parliament on both administration and enforcement on the one hand, and on research on the other. That's a very clear, unambiguous reporting requirement. It's an annual report.

It looks as though the department has failed to file annually since the beginning. This reaches back four or five years. There hasn't been a report filed for the fiscal year that ended in March 2009. There's no report for that year. That's a whole year gone by without a report. I'd just like to ask either of the witnesses who wanted to speak to this where the report for that particular fiscal year is.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I do take the point. Environment Canada is responsible for preparing the report with input from others and, for a lot of reasons, fell behind on reporting to Parliament, which is unacceptable. It fell behind on a number of different legislative requirements.

I'm pleased to say, though, that since I took this position a year ago we've filed 14 reports for a number of pieces of legislation, including two under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. However, the member is correct: the 2008-09 report is not yet out. We do expect it out very soon. It has been prepared. It's in the final approval stages. We have taken measures to avoid falling behind on our reporting to Parliament in the future.

Mr. Derek Lee: One thing I wanted to emphasize—and I'm not someone who chases statutory deadlines for the fun of it—is that these reporting mechanisms are there to assist Parliament in its work. The report isn't filed anywhere else. The report is for Parliament. In not filing on a timely basis, departments would handicap Parliament.

I'll ratchet that up just a little bit further. Failure to file in accordance with the statutory requirements would likely lead to a contempt of Parliament, and it would be your minister who would face this. If it's any help, I'll refer you to the rulings of Speaker Fraser in 1992 and 1993. They're pretty clear.

At some point, if your department is going to continue to be late—I'll be kind and say late, but it has actually never filed an annual report, and it tried to cover off two years with one report—your minister, your department, is going to be looking at something on the floor of the House of Commons, because some opposition member is going to decide that it's time to ring the bell. It might be me. I don't know. I've done it before.

I just wanted to get your comments. I wanted to get a commitment that the report you referred to is really on the conveyor belt, that it's going to be done soon, and that there will be good compliance in the future.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Rest assured that the minister has made the same observation and the report is on the conveyor belt to get out the door.

There was a period of time in which we got behind on reports. There had previously been fairly good compliance, but I do take the member's point. It is inappropriate. We understand that fully and, as I said, we now have a group dedicated to all of our annual reporting to Parliament to avoid this situation in the future.

Mr. Derek Lee: Is the department in some way underbuilt with respect to these types of requirements? You can be in a management transition and you can have two or three ministers in one year. You can have some bad luck, but is there some internal departmental obstacle here that you've identified and think you've overcome?

● (1000)

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Yes, I would think that is the case. In the past, it became an add-on to somebody's job; the reporting for Parliament was diffused amongst many people. We did have a major reorganization and restructuring so it was difficult to know who exactly was going to be accountable. We did address that by creating a group that's dedicated to parliamentary reporting.

It's now somebody's day job, as I say. This ensures that management knows—and then we know—who's accountable. We have procedures in place. They have to collect information from a lot of different people, but we now have clear timelines in place for people to submit the information and to get the report ready and translated and to Parliament.

Mr. Derek Lee: And as far as you know, your minister knows?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Oh, he does—rest assured.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Lee.

Mr. Derek Lee: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lee.

Now we're going to go to Mr. Young.

Mr. Young, you have five minutes.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

This is for Mr. Enei or anyone at the Department of the Environment or Department of Health.

Maybe even the brand new deputy minister of Health would like to try to answer this question; I'm sure you can, but it might not be fair because you're brand new.

I'm curious as to why we're using the term “risk management instead of “precautionary principle”. How did we get to risk management?

This process at Health Canada, the chemicals management plan, is in my view perhaps the most significant ever in assessing 200 high-priority substances and being on schedule for the assessments at 170. I also think that 70 assessments a year is an accomplishment. I think you're doing the right thing.

When you started this in 2006, you completed a triage of 23,000 existing chemicals. You identified 4,300 chemical substances for further attention and got it down to your high-priority substances. I've never seen government work this well on an environmental issue. Your accomplishments are very, very considerable.

Congratulations on being the first country in the world to ban bisphenol A in baby bottles. I think that was a gutsy move. I think it was a gutsy move to ban lead in children's toys. I think it will save lives. It will protect the health of infants and children.

My concern is about using the term “managing risk”. I'm wondering how important it is to have lead in consumer products at all. Why don't you use the momentum you now have—in fact, Canada is leading the world on lead and bisphenol A—and declare with some of these chemicals that by the precautionary principle, because the chemical is not proven safe for any use, you're going to ban the substance until the industry can prove it safe? Declare to industry that you are going to operate under the principle of “better safe than sorry”.

Everybody is anxious to try to answer that question.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I'll start and then allow some of my colleagues to jump in.

You compared the precautionary principle to risk management. The precautionary principle actually guides us throughout that entire cycle, and it guides us through the risk assessment phase. I'm sure my colleagues would be welcome to speak more on that aspect.

But as has been mentioned, many of these substances are quite ubiquitous. They're serving a purpose in society. For instance, we're still using mercury in instrument measurement. What we try to do is avoid future exposures. We try to control existing exposures. In some cases, that will be a ban—it's an appropriate tool—and in other cases, we look for phase-out over time. We also look for the precautionary principle even in terms of where our enforcement efforts come in. I think a precautionary principle applies throughout.

We do try to balance whether or not something is performing a useful purpose, if the risk can be controlled, and if there can be prevention of any releases to the environment and exposure to human health. Whether the substance has a useful value to society is something that we do have to demonstrate in our risk management. We have to compare the benefits and costs to get the appropriate instrument.

The other thing is that some of these substances are naturally occurring. With lead and mercury, you're always going to have some residual levels in the environment from natural sources. It's a matter of managing the exposures and trying to find the most cost-effective way to do that. That's where the precautionary principle does help us choose the appropriate measure.

● (1005)

Mr. Terence Young: Does anybody else want to take a stab at that?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: I would just support what my colleague has said about the precautionary principle. It is something that infuses our work as we go through the risk management set of criteria and as we look to the range of what appropriate tools or measures we should take.

When we look at the impact on human health, we very much include all the possibilities, from banning to mitigating to some other possibilities along that spectrum, as we look at the balance that my colleague has spoken to. From the examples that you raised, we very much err on the side of the precautionary principle informing our thinking, but we do feel that we have a series of tools that can be appropriate and deal with the substances.

I'll pass this on—

Mr. Terence Young: So my point is not just that you're not prioritizing it; I understand that you're using it, in effect. My concern is that the term has disappeared and I think that's had an effect on the entire process. When you use the industry language, I'm just afraid that we're buying into the industry needs as opposed to public safety.

May I ask you another question, Madam Yeates? This is with regard to the research. Do you ever use research from other countries? I know that you're doing research here on products.

Is there any kind of organization that will come out with a result that you will act on in actually limiting or banning a substance? Or do you feel it's important for you to reinvent or reproduce that research here? It occurs to me that you could save a lot of time and money if you shared research on substances, and you could act faster as well.

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you for the question.

We do in fact work with international partners and colleagues to share information and research findings. We very much appreciate that we are part of an international community and that these are typically questions that other developed countries are dealing with as well.

For example, our scientists sit on OECD task forces and committees to actually share the work, to share the findings and the scientific effort to pool our information. We do very much try to work with international colleagues to assess their findings, to take their findings on board, and to participate in international scientific effort.

Mr. Terence Young: My question was, do you act on that or do you have to reproduce it locally?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: We certainly can assess the science in any way. We would presumably not just take a finding without doing our own assessment, but that does not in all cases mean redoing the science. We can review the literature, review the information, and use all of the tools and developments across the world that are at our disposal.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Young.

We're now going to move on to Madame Beaudin, *pour cinq minutes*.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Sorry, Mr. Chairman; I will be using her five minutes.

In paragraph 2.39 of the report, it says: “The Consumer Chemicals and Containers Regulations, 2001, require classification and labelling of consumer chemical products, such as paint strippers.” There are hazards associated with the handling of toxic substances and exposure to such substances increased the risk of developing cancers associated with inappropriate use.

Do you receive requests from the provinces regarding certain substances—requests made with a view to lowering the cost of treating illness?

[*English*]

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you for the question.

I'm not aware of any, but I will ask my colleagues if they've had any dealings with the provinces on this question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Do you share your research with the provinces? Because in your statement, you said that you assess the human costs associated with treating illness related to chemical exposure. Do you share your research with the public?

[*English*]

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Yes, we do. I'll ask my colleague Karen Lloyd to answer your question more specifically.

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: Certainly, both Environment Canada and Health Canada are active in several different groups with the provinces. We have the committee on health and the environment, which I chair, and I co-chair another one, which is the national advisory committee under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. We share the information of our assessments, we consult with the provinces, and we seek their input, so we're actively engaged with them. If we come up with new information that we feel is under their jurisdiction, we share that information with them so they can take the appropriate action.

● (1010)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: When was the last meeting?

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: For the committee on health and the environment, it's next week or the week after. We have that twice a year. With both committees, it's twice a year, unless there's an issue—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: So, there are two meetings a year.

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: —that comes up that we specifically need their help on, and then we set up a conference call to deal with it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: When was the last time you met with provincial officials to discuss chemicals and developments pertaining to your analysis?

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: It would have been a few months ago, although whenever we come out with new assessments they get notice of it, and we have a conference call with them. That happens every two to three months.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: What is the name of that committee?

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Lloyd: It's the committee on health and environment, but there's also the national advisory committee under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. Whenever we're coming out with an assessment or a risk management action, we notify both those committees in advance and we consult with them.

We have meetings and we have a lot of conference calls and a lot of e-mails.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: My other question is somewhat broader. Let's look specifically at substances like lead and mercury. Lead is currently number two on the international list of hazardous substances, and mercury is in third place. How do you explain that fact that we still have no strategy targeting those two substances in particular?

Could you tell us how the government disposes of computer equipment, given that cathode ray screens contain lead? So, what does the federal government do with its computer waste?

[*English*]

Ms. Glenda Yeates: I will answer the question about why these more dangerous chemicals don't have specific strategies. I wouldn't want to leave the committee with the impression that it was because they were being ignored in any way. In some ways, it's precisely because they were known to be serious risks, or known to be risks that we needed to tackle, that the tackling of them began often 30 or 40 years ago.

We have a number of individual procedures, a number of regulatory areas, which we have followed up on over the years in lead, for example, to tackle everything from gasoline to teakettles or solder in tin cans. We've gradually been working on those—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Yes, I saw that in the Commissioner's report.

However, my question is… You are federal government officials and, as such, you hold positions of authority in the different government departments. I would like to know how you dispose of computer waste in your respective departments. Also, how do you ensure that this equipment does not end up in the environment? Good practices begin at home. The federal government is a major user of computer products and systems, and I would like to know how you deal with this. If you want to impose certain practices on the industry and on a wide scale, you have to be able to explain how you operate yourself.

[*English*]

Ms. Glenda Yeates: I appreciate the question. The Department of Health does not do the enforcement for the Government of Canada as an employer or for the Government of Canada as a property manager, so I'm afraid that I don't have that information in terms of how the government.... As you say, we do the regulation overall, and the government is one of the entities that clearly has to respond to the regulations, just as a private sector company would.

I'm sorry, but I don't have that information. It's not something that the Department of Health leads for the Government of Canada.

The Chair: *Merci, Madame Faille*.

We're now going to go to Mr. Shipley for five minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you.

I want to follow up a little bit on page 26 and exhibit 2.5: “Toxic substances are present in household dust”. Madame Faille raised an issue. It would appear that there is always a conflict between what consumers demand and what we are actually concerned about.

In this particular exhibit, you talk about the household dust that is present. It comes out of all sorts of things that we use, such as electronics and cellphones. There's been a concern about cellphones, about the transmission of their waves and brain cancer, and yet I think if you were to go around this room you would see that everybody has at least one of them. Yet because it seems to be a consumer demand, we as consumers will set aside—“well, it's not going to happen to me”—whatever the issue is.

One of the things that is not mentioned here is the example of the energy efficient light bulbs that we have. There are all sorts of statistics out there to suggest that the worst things you could actually have in your house are these energy efficient light bulbs, because of what they expel when they're on. And if they break, you don't want to be around them. The question is, are they disposed of in landfill sites? For most of them, there is no specific place for them to go; they get thrown in the trash, and when the trash goes out, that's what happens to many of them.

How are we regulating, in our risk management, the consumer demands that do not always seem to reflect the environmental concerns or the health concerns of Canadians? I guess that question goes certainly to the AG's office and to Health and Environment Canada.

● (1015)

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I can start, and I'll allow my colleagues to add to it.

You're quite right that many of these things are ubiquitous in products. That's why we are working on this regulation to deal with, for instance, the content of mercury in products. We envision this regulation becoming a standard to which we can add other substances so that we can quickly regulate these other substances that contain hazardous products.

The second thing we are working on—and we are working with the provinces on this—is what we call “extended producer responsibility”. Many of the provinces already have requirements that hazardous substances have take back programs, so that the substances go back to the manufacturer or are disposed of in a specific way.

We are now looking at whether or not there should be national regulations governing extended producer responsibility. There are also initiatives that municipalities and private companies are putting in place.

There are the two ends of the spectrum. One is preventing or reducing the amount of a hazardous substance in a product, and the second is dealing with the disposal of that product in a safe and sound manner. With respect to things like computers, there are now places that do collect and disassemble them in Canada. Sometimes there are actually valuable minerals that can be recycled and reused. That is now happening in Canada.

There are also standards for avoiding shipping offshore without proper assurances that it's going to be disposed of properly. For the Government of Canada, Public Works governs that, but it is in response to the regulations and instruments that we're putting in place.

Mr. Bev Shipley: As my colleague said, there have been some significant steps taken. Those need to be recognized. For example, mercury emissions are down by 90%. The concern seems to be that when these substances are coming in from other countries, our faith in some of the importers isn't likely to be really high, because they will do whatever it seems to take to get the product into our country.

This leads me to a question with regard to what the AG has talked about and that is the attention paid to the adequacy of departmental actions. Regarding enforcement efforts and the ability to recognize a risk without having to go through some sort of complex process, if there's a problem, how do we get to the point and what do we need to be able to do where we can get that product jerked off the shelf and put back and gone?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: That's one of the reasons why we're working with the United Nations Environment Programme to develop a binding instrument, because that would deal with sources and emissions from industry that are not yet controlled in some countries and that expose Canada through airborne sources, particularly our Arctic. It will also deal with reducing the demand for mercury in products, actually reducing it in products, and ensuring safe disposal.

Ms. Glenda Yeates: I would add that in terms of consumer products the ability to get them off the shelf and “gone”, as you say, has been something that we have been very concerned about. We are currently working with a very old piece of legislation, and we believe that we regulate using the powers that we have under that legislation. But under that legislation, we don't have the powers of recalls, for example, to actually ensure that we can take products off the shelves.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Should you have it?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Yes. We believe that it is something we should have. That's why, in the proposed new Canada Consumer Product Safety Act, we had proposed that the department have the ability to do recalls. Currently we can only do them on a voluntary basis, working with industry. While that works in many cases, we believe that having a firm recall power, as was proposed in the former Bill C-6, would be appropriate.

● (1020)

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Shipley.

We'll now go back to Mr. Christopherson for up to five minutes.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

I want to stay on the issue of lead and mercury. To listen to all of you, including you, Mr. Commissioner, you would think that there may be a problem or two out there, but everything is okay and nobody needs to worry about anything. That's the impression I'm getting from all of you.

I focus on the commissioner. Your rather detailed defence of the ministry actions was noted.

I want to just put on the record here that we're talking about lead and mercury. I'm from the labour movement and we've been dealing with these things for an awfully long time. When I started out, my very first elected position in the whole world was as chair of my little shop's health and safety committee.

Anyway, Commissioner, your chart shows that of seven substances, three of them were listed in 1988 as toxic under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act.

Here are the potential hazards of lead listed in the commissioner's document:

> High blood pressure, kidney damage, nerve disorders, memory and concentration problems, cognitive impairment and learning disabilities in children, difficulties during pregnancy, digestive problems, pain in the muscles and joints.
>
> Lead poisoning noted in wildlife.

Mercury was listed in 1988 as toxic under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. Its potential hazards include:

> Permanent damage to the brain and kidneys. Damage or irritation of the lungs, stomach, intestines, and airways.
>
> Mercury poisoning noted in wildlife.

This is what we're talking about. Again, everything sounds just fine up here, and yet I look at your report and listen to what you said this morning, Commissioner, and it's just not clear to me, because you're the one who said in your prepared remarks, “This”—meaning your audit—“underscores a key observation of the audit: despite progress, the risk posed by toxic substances such as lead and mercury still require active management”. You say, two paragraphs later, “The first relates to risk management strategies”.

I know that you basically said, “I don't know what you are talking about, Mr. MP”, and that I was all wrong and they were all right, but I'm just reading your words, sir. That same paragraph says: “While these strategies were in place for the 5 of the 7 substances we examined, they are still not in place for lead and mercury”.

So, Commissioner, I'm asking you, sir, is there a problem or not?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you very much for the question.

The reason we did this report is exactly to underscore that there is a problem. So my previous comment was not on the management, which is what this audit looked at; the previous comment was on the assessment part.

On the management part, the reason we did this report was for exactly the reasons that you've underscored right now. We picked a range of toxic substances that pose health and environmental risks, ranging from cancer to reproductive problems to development problems, particularly in children.

We know that scientists have known for years that children and infants aren't little adults, so exposure of even minute amounts of these substances can create significant, acute problems over the long term. Particularly for children, we pointed out several problems, including what we've discussed this morning: products that can be found on the shelves in Canada which exceed acceptable limits and therefore pose health risks to the most vulnerable segments of the Canadian population—children. That's the first point.

On the second part of this, Mr. Chair, if I may say so, I think the previous member's question on the issue of precaution is exactly at the heart of this question, and it is in the assessment and management process that the precautionary principle, in my understanding.... And these are complicated questions. When does the weight of evidence stop because there are some unknowns? And when you don't know, when do you then say that we can't authorize, license, or let these products or these exposure rates come to the shelves or expose Canadians to them?

That, I think, is an important debate and an important discussion, which the whole idea of the precautionary principle, from the Earth Summit and before, was intended to address. In the face of the risk of irreversible damages, you should err on the side of precaution. We do this in the business world. We do it elsewhere.

Finally, Mr. Chair, if I may, the reason we picked these chemicals, and the range of these chemicals, is that they last for a long time. They're persistent and they're bioaccumulative. On the risks related to long-term, low-dose exposure to many of these chemicals, we simply do not know the answer. But we do know that in Canada today, one to three or one to four adults will be diagnosed with cancer. We know that the Canadian Cancer Society has said there are many reasons for this, but one of them is environmental exposure rates.

That's just to underscore the reason we've done this audit and the reason we've had excellent cooperation, not only with the two departments but with many others, including NGOs we have worked with on this: because these are serious environmental risks and they're serious health risks.

● (1025)

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Commissioner. That helps. That is a helpful contribution.

I have one quick final question. The management action plan status of September 4, 2009, under “Mercury”, says, “An integrated risk management strategy that contains clear objectives, performance expectations and timelines will be developed”. The deadline for completion was winter 2009-10. Could I ask where we are? Did you meet your deadline?

It also says, “The strategy will be brought forward for senior management approval by fall 2009 and will be made publicly available on Environment Canada's Web site by winter 2009/10.” Is that happening? Did you hit your targets there?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Yes. We do have a draft of the strategy going through the approval process. In addition, we have taken an extra step of combining on our website all of the instruments that are in place and the instruments that are under development already, so Canadians can see that right now.

Mr. David Christopherson: Both of these completions are done?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: We're on target for finishing both of those objectives.

Mr. David Christopherson: In the timeframe you promised?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Yes. We're in the process—

Mr. David Christopherson: We're already into spring 2010.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: That's right. We're in the approval process of the strategy.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm sorry: “approval process”? I'm sorry, ma'am. It's either done or it's not.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: It's in a draft and going through the final approval.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay, so it's not done yet, and since we're into the spring, how can you tell me that you met the completion deadline?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Well, I think we were flagging that there are two aspects to it. There was one that the commissioner was getting at, which is communicating what you're already doing and what instruments are in place. Then, as I explained, there's pulling that all together in the strategy. So we have done the pulling together of all the instruments that are in place and the strategy that will talk about any future additional actions, as well as what we already have in place.

Mr. David Christopherson: I still don't know whether that's a yes or a no, but okay.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

Just to follow up on that, Ms. Wright, you say that your toxic substance list is up and running now. It lists the various toxic substances...?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I was speaking specifically about mercury, but we do have already on the website all of the substances. For each substance, you can now go in and find out what instruments are in place. Specifically for mercury, you can go in and find a summary of the risks and what instruments are in place. We do have instruments in place that we are managing and monitoring for all sources of mercury.

The Chair: But has that been a recent development?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: Yes.

The Chair: Because that didn't exist last week, but it exists today, or yesterday.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I think it was April 1, but it did not exist at the time of the audit. I think that's what the commissioner was saying. We have many, many instruments in place. We have strategies for specific types of sources, but we don't have one overarching strategy.

The Chair: And you did have a website, "Management of Toxic Substances", as well as the "Toxic Substances Research Initiative Secretariat" website. Those websites have expired. They don't exist.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: The toxic substances research initiative has expired, but on our website for Environment Canada, on the Green Lane, if you now type in "mercury", you will get the list of initiatives that are in place and under development.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

We are now going to go to Mr. Kramp for five minutes.

Mr. Kramp.

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Might I just express a sincere level of thanks to all of you for coming here today? Like many of my colleagues, I don't believe there is a greater service that we as parliamentarians can perform than to advance the role of health and safety and the protection of Canadian citizens.

As such, both the departments and the commissioner play a significant role in bringing that to our attention, because we cannot prepare or propose legislation or resolutions unless—building on Mr. Lee's comment—the information is accurate and timely. We would emphasize that fact, and I think that's very important, but I can tell you that we certainly appreciate the effort you are making. In particular, of course, we certainly appreciate the dramatic improvement that we've seen in the chemicals management plan, both the establishment of that and the results of that. I would echo Mr. Young and say that I'm very, very pleased to see this.

I have a particular concern that I would just like to build upon. It's the comment made by the commissioner when he mentioned long-term, low-dose exposure. I'd like to direct my question to our health officials with just a little bit of history on this.

Twenty-five or more years ago, I was in municipal politics in a municipality that was affected by mercury in the Deloro Smelting situation. There was mercury contamination and arsenic down through the entire river system, and obviously a very abnormally high level of concern for serious illnesses or afflictions due to the toxins, as presented by our medical officer of health at that particular point.

I asked that medical officer of health at an open meeting that was held then what process she had in place, or what studies, that would give us, if we were bringing this under control, the long-term low exposure that was going to stay. At that time, her response was, "We are undertaking that study and we will have answers for you". It's 25 years later. I still don't have an answer to that.

Are there long-term low exposure studies under way with regard to these toxins? If so, what are the results? And if not, why not?

● (1030)

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you for the question. I'll begin the answer, and then perhaps my colleagues will want to add some details.

But there is absolutely a need for ongoing studies to understand the long-term impacts. It's one of the reasons that we believe the biomonitoring program that has been started is so key, because now we can actually, with the assistance of working with Statistics Canada, which has significant expertise in statistical analysis and monitoring.... Canadians have proven to be quite willing to come forward and be part of these biomonitoring samples where we actually take blood levels and other samples that we can test and thus look in the long term at exposure. So I think we have a very new and quite important mechanism on an ongoing basis.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Is this initiative regional, local, or national? I'd really like you to extrapolate a bit more on that.

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you.

It is a national initiative, but there are a number of sites across the country. There are pilot sites at various points so we aren't just gathering information in one part of the country, for example. They are distributed across the country.

For example, we also have a program to work with first nations communities, because we know that we have some specific risks. We want to follow up and make sure that we can augment our information from the national study to understand whether there are specific risks in those communities.

We also know that, particularly with mercury, historically there have been some challenges for Inuit people because of some of the exposures in the Arctic. So we have a particular protocol called the northern contaminants program, in which we work with INAC and others in the community, with the territories, and with the aboriginal groups in the Arctic to make sure that we can have an ongoing mechanism to examine and look at that particular population, where we know from the research that there are specific issues.

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Just because I'm running out of time, I'd like to slip over to our MOE officials. I was involved in the retail sporting goods industry, the outdoors, and the fishing organizations. During that particular time, the fishing was basically stopped because of the contamination and the high levels of concentration in the fish for mercury and that.

We were told that it would probably never be cleared over our lifetime, so to be prepared for it, yet three or four years later, an all-clear was given. Please square this box for me. It's our understanding that somehow, someway, we've reduced this mercury contamination by 90%, according to the reports. Yet if 95% of the toxins come from outside our borders, how did we achieve that? Were they that successful internationally? I just don't understand those numbers.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I'll try. Essentially what the 90% reduction means from sources within Canada, so industry products manufactured and used in Canada...so that has come down substantially. We always start with a pie that shows all the sources, so if you will, the pie is now quite small in Canada. Exposures in Canada have gone down overall, but when we look at how Canadians and the environment are still being exposed, it's that 95% of the exposure they're still facing comes from outside Canada.

● (1035)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Kramp.

We're now going to go back to Monsieur Dion, *pour cinq minutes*.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: *Merci, monsieur le président.*

I don't think we should conclude this meeting without addressing the situation of our populations in the north of our country. And the report confirms what we know: that they are particularly exposed to lead and mercury. Mercury is likely to become worse. I'm not sure of what you just said. I think the level of mercury around the world is increasing. This will affect Canada, that being only because India and China will double their consumption of coal over the next two decades.

I would like to ask the two departments: what are your strategies to protect these populations since they are particularly exposed to lead and more and more mercury?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: I can begin on the mercury side in particular. We do share the concern that has been raised in terms of the findings, because recent biomonitoring has found concentrations of mercury in some of the Canadian Inuit populations. We have found some evidence that these may be decreasing, but we certainly want to continue to be vigilant.

That's the reason we have $4 million per year between our departments for a northern contaminants program, not all in Health Canada, but led by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. That's where we monitor on an ongoing basis and understand whether the risks are increasing or decreasing. Once we have the information about what's happening, we can then target our responses appropriately.

We very much appreciate the risk in the Arctic and are working very hard with our other colleagues and with the territories and the groups on the ground, the aboriginal groups and others, to make sure that we have an active program to understand the risk and that then allows us to target our efforts to respond to it.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I think the member is quite right in that the issue is going to be the increased industrial activity, particularly in Asia, and that's why work has started under UNEP. Specifically, negotiations will start in June of this year and are aiming to conclude in 2013. The objective would be a binding treaty on all parties to reduce all sources, including industrial emissions that would be subject to long-range transport, which is what is really affecting the Canadian Arctic. It will deal with industrial emissions, products and that sort of thing, including waste and disposal of mercury-containing products.

The other area that's relevant to some of the other substances the commissioner discussed is the Stockholm Convention, which aims to reduce pollutants of an organic pollutant nature internationally, recognizing that those are also subject to long-range transport and are affecting the Arctic.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I would like to draw the attention of both the Commissioner and the two departments to the issue of PCBs. Your report contains a rather mysterious and disturbing paragraph. I would like to get some clarification. It is paragraph 2.55, in the middle of the paragraph, where it reads:

> However, research conducted by a number of different organizations since the 1990s indicates that the use of PCBs in sealants may represent a source of ongoing exposure to low levels of PCBs, present risks to workers restoring or demolishing these structures, and result in localized soil contamination and contaminated waste. We found that neither Environment Canada nor Health Canada has responded to this research, for example, by conducting research to determine the existence and significance of PCBs in building sealants, including federal facilities and buildings on federal lands. We note that several members of the Stockholm Convention have recognized this issue.

First of all, Mr. Vaughan, who are you referring to when you say that organizations since the 1990s have been talking about this problem with PCBs?

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Thank you for your question.

First of all, we noted that research has been conducted by the University of Toronto. That research includes a map identifying older buildings in Toronto which are probably associated with the PCB problem. So, there is a map that specifically identifies those buildings.

I believe research has also been conducted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regarding those substances.

Mr. McKenzie, would you like to add something?

● (1040)

[*English*]

Mr. Jim McKenzie (Principal, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That's an important question. On PCBs, what we've noted, as Mr. Vaughan has mentioned, is that during our work we talked to various organizations involved in the management of toxic substances and this issue came up. We were speaking to an expert, a researcher in Toronto who has been pursuing this, who also pointed out that research is taking place both in Europe and in the United States regarding this issue.

Recently, the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States has launched new research into the presence of PCBs in caulking in older buildings. They have issued guidance for schools. It's an old substance. It's an emerging issue with respect to an old substance. Again, it's an example of how we may feel that we've made a lot of progress in terms of some of these substances, and then science comes along and says there are still some issues that need to be addressed.

So just in summary, there are researchers in Europe and the United States, as well as Canada.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I understand that there is a lot of research, and you are saying the two departments did not react to that, and Canada *se traîne les pieds, si je comprends bien*. So can I ask the two departments what is happening specifically on this issue in paragraph 2.55?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you very much for the question.

We certainly share the view that this is an important emerging issue. As has been noted, this is an issue that has emerged relatively recently. Our scientists are aware of it. We've been in discussions with the U.S. EPA, for example. As they are doing research, we want to be linked to it so we are in touch with them.

As was noted earlier, we try wherever we can to work in partnership with other countries. If any one of us discovers something new, an emergent issue, we will work on it. It's also an issue that we will monitor as the science develops.

But even while it's in the developmental stage, we will make our colleagues in the provinces and territories aware. Because there may be occupational health and safety guidance they would want to follow up on even while the science is developmental.

So this is an issue we are monitoring internationally, and if the science that we discover, or that our partners discover in concert with us...we share this information. If we have new information that additional action is warranted, then we will certainly take it.

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I would just briefly add that the existing PCB regulations do cover the safe disposal of mercury, including from sealants and paints.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Wright.

Mr. Dreeshen, you have five minutes.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming here today.

There are just a couple of questions. Really, I wanted to speak somewhat about the research and the surveys and about some of the different programs you've had. I noted in paragraph 2.59 that there's discussion on the Canadian Health Measures Survey that took place in 2007, on the testing that was done, and the fact that this was completed in 2009, I believe, or at least during that span. I was just wondering if you could comment on some of the results that you did see from that particular survey.

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you very much for the question.

The first cycle of the survey is now complete, as you mentioned. The results of this survey will be released this summer, so we'll start to have very good information that comes out. The second cycle is already under way. I think that longitudinal sense of how things are moving over time will also be very important for us.

We have started to see some of the initial findings on lead. For example, some of the data that's been talked about today were some of the early findings from those studies. We will be releasing the findings with more of the analysis this summer. We think there's a good opportunity to continue to put this information in the public domain and, as we say, to continue to monitor. We think the trends over time will be very important.

● (1045)

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you.

The other was the 2007 study, “Maternal-Infant Research on Environmental Chemicals”, and I wonder if anyone could comment on that as well.

Ms. Glenda Yeates: I'd be happy to comment on that. When we spoke earlier about the various facets of a strategy, it is the assessment and the risk management, but it also is research and ongoing science, some of which we get internationally, but others of which we do actually here in Canada. The maternal-infant research on environmental chemicals is a study of that nature and we think it's very important.

I think we're all particularly thoughtful about the particular risks for pregnant women, for example, in terms of those risks from environmental exposure to heavy metals. This is a cohort study that has been established. We are in the midst of undertaking that study now. Through that, we believe that we'll be able to have additional information on pregnant women and babies in terms of their exposure to environmental chemicals. That will give us the kind of research that might then again inform future action.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Is this information being shared, then, with your provincial and territorial counterparts as well? I noted that when Mr. Saxton addressed this earlier he was speaking about that multi-jurisdictional portion. I'm just wondering whether or not you feel that everyone is getting the information they need, how well things are working, and if perhaps you're having any difficulties that we might be able to help out with.

Ms. Glenda Yeates: I appreciate the question. As a former provincial deputy minister of health, I certainly take the partnership with the provinces very, very seriously. I think it's clear that we do work in provinces. Whether it's on the occupational health and safety front or in the public health domain, or with the public health officers who work for our regional health authorities or others across the country, what's important is that we have the capacity centrally in Health Canada to gather the science.

We have the expertise in assessing the science and putting it out there. Ultimately, we want to make sure that our partners on the ground, as I say, either as public health officers or provinces and territories, have the information, so we work very much in partnership. My colleague has spoken about the ongoing and regular committee processes we have to keep informed so that the information is not only generated at a high quality but disseminated and used throughout the country.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: This may be my last question. I'm on the aboriginal affairs and northern development committee. Could you perhaps comment a little more on your northern contaminants program? You spoke of different ways of being able to present your efforts and to take a look at the types of things that you feel are happening. What do you feel are going to be some of the results of that particular program?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Again, I think the Arctic poses some particular challenges. I think we're very mindful of being supportive of country foods and other things that support a healthy lifestyle for people in the Arctic. But we also recognize that there may be some particular challenges with some of the contaminants we've spoken of.

Very much, we see this as a partnership on an ongoing basis. Again, we'll monitor the trends over time. We can inform local communities in the Arctic on what the contaminant status is in various foods and give them the information and the assurance they need to act either as individuals or as communities or governments as to whether there is additional action that needs to be taken. I think it's a key part of the strategy of informing consumers and also informing potential regulatory events.

Again, the fact is that it's not just federal government departments around the table, but a broad range of stakeholders who bring their perspectives and who can then take the information and use it in their roles.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Dreeshen.

That concludes the second round. I just have one quick question to Ms. Yeates and perhaps to Mr. Gray.

One of the primary documents that parliamentarians receive on an annual basis is, of course, the departmental performance reports from each of the departments—the Department of the Environment, the Department of Health. The reports are to be used by legislators, the public, and the media. I usually read them before the hearing. I didn't read them in this particular case, but I will, and if I read them, is there a very good, readable summary on this whole issue—because it is an important issue—in your departmental performance reports?

● (1050)

Ms. Glenda Yeates: It's an excellent question. I confess that I have looked at our departmental reports, but I don't recall this specific detail. In general terms, I would be confident that we have outlined it there, but I would want to double-check and just make sure. I know that the chemicals management plan is referenced in the report, and certainly the ongoing targets are part of what we report to parliamentarians on. So it is part of the report and I will just have to double-check, in my case, for the details.

The Chair: Mr. Gray, do you have anything to say?

Dr. Brian Gray: I can't add much more detail to that. The chemical management plan is in the report.

The Chair: Okay.

The time for the meeting is almost up and I am going to adjourn. We've had a good hearing. I thank all the members. I thank all the witnesses.

I want to provide ample opportunity for each of the main witnesses to provide us with any closing comments that you want to make in concluding.

I am going to start with you, Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Scott Vaughan: Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

Let me just underscore again how much we've appreciated appearing before this committee. As we've heard in the last two hours, these are important issues, and specifically, these are important management issues. I very much look forward to working with this committee on these and other important matters, and we hope this has been beneficial to members as well as to us. We look forward to working with you in the future. Thank you very much again.

The Chair: Again, we want to thank you and your office for all the great work.

Ms. Yeates, do you have any closing or concluding comments?

Ms. Glenda Yeates: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just to reinforce what the commissioner has said, I think we very much appreciate the focus and interest from the parliamentarians. Sometimes this work by our scientists and others goes a bit unheralded and unseen by Canadians. I think we share the interest in and the sense of its importance.

I would also reinforce that we've had some discussion today about perhaps augmenting the work with some of the modernized tools. We would certainly hope, if there is future consideration by Parliament of the Canada Consumer Product Safety Act, that it would in fact enable us to do this work with even more up-to-date tools and measures.

Thank you very much for the interest.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Yeates.

Ms. Wright, do you have any concluding comments?

Mrs. Cynthia Wright: I just want to underscore that we do take this as an important area and we are actively continuing to manage these substances, older substances as well as the newer ones.

I just want to clarify.... I know that I left Mr. Christopherson a little confused in terms of where we were at on the action plan. What we did was that we added an extra element to it of collecting.... The commissioner made the point that Canadians can't find out today what's going on and what we're planning to do. So we added into our action plan—it's not reflected in the details of where we're at—to put that information together on the website. We have completed that, but that delayed us on the integrated document that pulls it all together, which will come out shortly.

The Chair: Again, thank you very much.

I just want to remind everyone that the committee of course will be writing a report on this hearing and that report will eventually be tabled in Parliament. Again, I want to thank everyone for the meeting.

I remind everyone that there is another meeting starting at 11 o'clock, so I would urge everyone to vacate this room as soon as possible.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Additional copies may be obtained from: Publishing and Depository Services
Public Works and Government Services Canada
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0S5
Telephone: 613-941-5995 or 1-800-635-7943
Fax: 613-954-5779 or 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: http://www.parl.gc.ca

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

On peut obtenir des copies supplémentaires en écrivant à : Les Éditions et Services de dépôt
Travaux publics et Services gouvernementaux Canada
Ottawa (Ontario) K1A 0S5
Téléphone : 613-941-5995 ou 1-800-635-7943
Télécopieur : 613-954-5779 ou 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : http://www.parl.gc.ca