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EPA Air Toxics Program Failing to Reduce Human Health Risks, Not Meeting Congressional Requirements

Washington, D.C. — A report issued today by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) air toxics program is failing to reduce public health risks from cancer-causing toxic air pollution as the Clean Air Act requires. The report, titled, "EPA Should Improve Management of Its Air Toxics Program" was requested by Reps. John D. Dingell (D-MI), Henry A. Waxman (D-CA), Hilda L. Solis (D-CA) and others to assess EPA's progress in implementing the air toxics program.

The GAO found that over the past 15 years the air toxics program has failed to meet the Clean Air Act's deadlines for addressing this threat. EPA has completed less than 4 percent of the Act's air toxics requirements on time, completed 67 percent of the requirements late, and has failed to complete nearly 30 percent of the Act's requirements, leaving many pollution sources uncontrolled. The GAO stated "As a result of the limited progress in implementing these requirements, EPA has not reduced human health risks from air toxics to the extent and in the time frames envisioned in the act."

"We in Congress who voted for these deadlines expected better from EPA; the American people deserved better," said Congressman Dingell, Ranking Member of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. "And the Bush Administration's chronic underfunding of environmental priorities means that progress will continue to be limited."

"Almost every American has been touched by the scourge of cancer, but the Bush Administration is pandering to polluting industries instead of cracking down on toxic emissions," said Congressman Waxman, Ranking Member of the Committee on Government Reform. "Virtually all Americans face an increased risk of cancer from breathing toxic air pollution, yet EPA refuses to carry out the Clean Air Act's mandates, leaving everyone exposed to unnecessary cancer risks."

"The Bush Administration's decision to make reduction of air toxics a 'low priority' is a slap in the face to the ninety-five percent of Americans who are at risk of cancer as a result of exposure to these pollutants, and a direct affront to those already suffering from poor health," said Congresswoman Solis, Member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. "I urge the Bush Administration to correct this situation immediately, for the sake of everyone's health."

The GAO also found that:

- The air toxics program is a low priority for EPA.
- EPA may be underestimating the total risk to public health from toxic air pollution, and particularly from certain high impact facilities.

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- Most unmet Clean Air Act requirements would limit emissions from small stationary and mobile sources — which account for the majority of toxic air pollution.
- EPA has failed to review and update the list of regulated toxic air pollutants despite evidence that potentially harmful chemicals remain unregulated.

Air toxics, such as benzene, chlorine, and asbestos, contribute to a number of health problems, including cancer, damage to reproductive functions, and birth defects. They are emitted by large stationary sources such as industrial facilities, small stationary sources such as dry cleaners, and mobile sources (such as trucks) and the fuels they run on. Sixteen years after Congress passed these provisions, EPA still has failed to control significant sources of toxic air pollution.

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