

REGULATORY SCIENCE

More Details Sought in Assessing Health Risks

The Bush Administration this week proposed new federal standards for analyzing health and environmental risks underlying regulations that ask for more details on the evidence that a pollutant causes harm. Experts agree that the changes should improve the quality of assessments, although one critic worries that the bar would be set so high that it could also slow the pace of new regulations.

The draft bulletin* “provides clear, minimum standards for the scientific quality of federal agency risk assessments,” says John Graham, the outgoing director of the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB’s) Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. Graham, a former Harvard University professor who in the past 5 years has bolstered the office’s influence on agency rulemaking, says the standards should help risk assessments pass scientific review more quickly.

The proposed rules include steps that aren’t always routine, such as requiring that agencies weigh both positive and negative studies. The document also asks agencies preparing assessments that could have a major economic or policy impact to look more closely at the

* www.whitehouse.gov/omb/inforeg/proposed_risk_assessment_bulletin_010906.pdf

AVIAN INFLUENZA

More Cases in Turkey, but No Mutations Found

The H5N1 avian influenza strain has sprung another surprise on public health experts, infecting at least 14 people in Turkey in the past few weeks. That’s a “very high and worrying” number, says virologist Albert Osterhaus of Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, given that fewer than 150 people (half of them fatally) are known to have been stricken during its 2-year rampage across large swaths of Asia.

The slim bit of good news this week is that the virus does not appear to have mutated and become more dangerous to humans, says epidemiologist Guénaél Rodier, who leads a 10-member World Health Organization (WHO) team of experts investigating the incidents and assisting the Turkish government. But the outbreak among birds, first reported in October, is much worse than originally believed, Rodier says, and the lack of control and protection measures has given the virus ample opportunity to cross the species barrier.

As *Science* went to press, only four of the 14 cases—including two fatalities—identified by the National Influenza Centre in Ankara had been independently confirmed by

uncertainties, including variability in the population and both middle estimates and the range of risks. Some agencies tend to emphasize the high end of risk, says an OMB official. “This is a big change in practice, especially for parts of EPA [the Environmental Protection Agency],” explains the official.

Kimberly Thompson, a risk expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge and president-elect of the Society for Risk Analysis, applauds the greater emphasis on quantitative tools. “This basically outlines things agencies should have been doing all along,” agrees Granger Morgan of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who chairs EPA’s scientific advisory board. But toxicologist Jennifer Sass of the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C., suggests that scientists won’t be able to meet the standards for risks for which there are little underlying data. “I’m concerned that regulations will die at OMB” as a result, she says.

Graham leaves next month to head the Pardee RAND Graduate School in Santa Monica, California. The comment period closes on 15 June, and the proposed bulletin will also be reviewed by the National Academies.

—JOCELYN KAISER

the U.K.’s National Institute for Medical Research, a WHO Collaborating Center for influenza. But because of the high quality of testing by the Ankara center, WHO expects the remaining 10 cases to be confirmed as well. The cases occurred in six provinces in central, northern, and eastern Turkey.

As in East Asia, the disease appears to have stricken people who have been in close contact with dead or ill poultry, often members of the same family, and often children. “We feel it’s very similar to the situation in Asia,” says Rodier. There’s little to suggest that H5N1 has become more easily transmissible from poultry to people, or between humans, traits that could trigger a pandemic, he says. Preliminary genetic analyses by the U.K. laboratory confirm that the Turkey strain is very similar to one circulating last year in western China, says WHO spokesperson Maria Cheng.

Rodier believes that safer handling of dead and infected poultry, plus more aggressive monitoring and control efforts, might have prevented some of the infections. “It’s too bad that it took human cases to trigger more awareness,” he notes.

—MARTIN ENSERINK

Canada Targets Chemicals

Canada has decided to examine all chemicals that could break down to perfluorocarboxylic acids (PFCAs), which cause cancer and developmental problems in lab animals. In 2004, Canada temporarily banned four polymers that contain precursors to PFCAs; those and similar polymers are widely used in products including stain repellents and paint additives.

The broader review comes as the country’s regulatory body, Environment Canada, releases risk assessments that say PFCAs can bioaccumulate; previous studies have shown increasing levels of the chemicals in Arctic animals. The chemical industry argues that PFCAs are a legacy of past pollution, but University of Toronto chemist Scott Mabury says up to 4% of PFCAs come from humanmade products.

—REBECCA RENNER

Shakeup at CNRS

PARIS—Physicist Catherine Bréchnignac is returning to the helm of France’s largest research institute. The National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) announced this week that Bréchnignac, the institute’s director-general between 1997 and 2000, will return as CNRS president. She replaces physicist Bernard Meunier (right), who stepped down last week.

It was widely known that Meunier was at odds with CNRS director-general Bernard Larroutourou over an ongoing reorganization. Both men declined comment, but in a letter to center staff, Meunier said he had hoped to cut red tape and make CNRS “strong, reactive, daring, and open to society.”

A CNRS spokesperson says the agency’s dual leadership structure will be replaced with a single director in the next few months, but it’s too early to say who.



—MARTIN ENSERINK

At NIH: The Inevitable

The 0.1% cut to the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) will soon hit investigators’ bottom lines. This week, NIH decided to trim the 2006 payout for continuing grants by 2.35%, the first cut in recent memory. New grants will be funded at equivalent 2005 levels, with student and postdoc stipends mostly level. Advocates wince, citing biomedical inflation of at least 3%.

—JOCELYN KAISER