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EPA Issues Nanotechnology White Paper

Against a backdrop of debate over whether nanotechnology should be subject to immediate regulation, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has released a white paper concluding that the potential environmental, health, and safety risks posed by engineered nanomaterials require more scientific research.

Perceived risks of nanotechnology have received considerable public attention for an industry still in its infancy. Scientific research itself, however, remains at a relatively early stage. The field of “nanotechnology” is also far from homogeneous. The universe of engineered nanomaterials includes titanium, silicon, and zinc oxide nanopowders; quantum dots; carbon nanotubes, buckyballs, and nanofoam; protein cylinders and bubbles; polymer nanolattices; and an assortment of nanowhiskers, wires, clays, and coatings. Assessments of environmental, health, and safety risks must take into account such different types of nanomaterials, as well as the ultimate products and the processes used to make them.

In December 2004, as part of a continuing nanotechnology initiative begun during the Clinton administration, the National Science and Technology Counsel of the Executive Office of the President published a strategic plan. One of the plan’s stated goals is to support the responsible development of nanotechnology by addressing environmental, health, and safety implications. To that end, the EPA Science Policy Council created a cross-agency work group to assess “key science issues” which the EPA should consider “to ensure that society accrues the important benefits to environmental protection that nanotechnology may offer, as well as to better understand any potential risks from exposure to nanomaterials in the environment.” The EPA’s 2007 white paper resulted from the efforts of this cross-agency group.

Noting that “[o]ur economy will be increasingly affected by nanotechnology as more products containing nanomaterials move from research and development into production and commerce,” the white paper aims “to inform EPA management of the science needs

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associated with nanotechnology, to support related EPA program office needs, and to communicate these nanotechnology science issues to stakeholders and the public." The white paper leads with a discussion of potential benefits of nanotechnology, including for environmental clean-up and the sustainable use of resources. After a review of existing information about nanomaterials, the white paper expresses the belief "that partnership with industrial sectors will ensure that responsible development is part of initial

decision making," and that "working in partnership . . . to develop best practices and standards . . . would help ensure the responsible development of the production, use, and end of life management of nanomaterials." The white paper then offers "an extensive review of pending research needs for both environmental applications and implications of nanotechnology," concluding with recommendations that likewise focus on further research.