Volume IX, Number 2
March/April 2009

# THE NEXT STEP

## Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

## Remaking the EPA

Like other environmental observers, I was cheered when candidate Barack Obama said that, in his Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), "the principle of scientific integrity will be an absolute, and I will never sanction any attempt to subvert the work of scientists." President Obama's choice for EPA head, Lisa Jackson, affirmed this commitment in her introductory letter to staff, pledging to "uphold the values of scientific integrity, rule of law, and transparency every day."

This change in direction is also heartening for those, such as the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), who for years have drawn attention to the Bush administration's "pattern of suppression, manipulation, and distortion of federal science" in order to advance its predetermined policy objectives. This, says the UCS, has significantly hindered policymakers in making informed decisions; decreased agency effectiveness; threatened our ability to respond to our nation's challenges; risked "demoralizing the federal scientific workforce"; and made "our government less accountable to the citizens it is supposed to serve."

Among the countless decisions compromised was one I discussed in the last newsletter – the EPA's shocking choice not to set federal limits on perchlorate exposure in drinking water. It did so over the objections of its own scientists, removing from its report key scientific evidence of the reasons for concern.

So it's a relief to hear the EPA's Jackson now call science the "backbone" of the agency's programs, and speak her commitment to view data objectively and disclose the information supporting their conclusions. She outlined her five priority goals: reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving air quality, managing chemical risks, cleaning up hazardous waste sites, and protecting America's water. She added, "These challenges are indeed immense in scale and urgency. But, as President Obama said [at his Inauguration], they will be met." (More about her letter is at <www.ombwatch.org/node/9639>.)

However, for that promise to be fulfilled, we citizens need to insist on its implementation, because ahead surely lie the pitfalls of vested financial interests, competing budget priorities, and bureaucratic inertia. We need to empower their ability to act.

One specific item did encourage me. Jackson in her previous job (head of New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection) supported a five parts per billion perchlorate standard, within the National Academy of Science's recommendations.

### What You Can Do

I encourage you to learn more about the action options being discussed, then speak for the ones you value, either through the groups taking action or directly to President Obama at <www.whitehouse.gov/contact>. Also support the nonprofits that inform us and coalesce our voices.

Here are some places to start.

■ **Union of Concerned Scientists**. For UCS's detailed recommendations for change (based on interviews with EPA scientists) and ways to join their efforts, see <www.ucsusa.org/scientific_ integrity>

■ **Pesticide Action Network (PAN)**. This international group, which works for global reduction of pesticide use, has submitted recommendations endorsed by nearly 100 organizations and thousands of individuals. Its top priorities include scientific integrity, transparency, accountability, public and environmental health, and a green and fair economy. View it and sign on at <www.panna.org/agenda-for-change>.

■ **The Louisville Charter for Safer Chemicals**. Signed by 70 groups, including PAN, this community-created declaration calls for government leadership in key areas of chemical policy, including restoring scientific integrity in chemical regulation, adopting the precautionary principle to ensure product safety before going to market, and increasing transparency in decision-making. <www.louisvillecharter.org>

As President Obama said election night, this moment "is not the change we seek; it is only the chance for us to make that change." We need to take action for the possibilities to become real. But, because these ideals are being spoken at government's highest levels, positive results become more possible and our efforts more effective. What a wonderful time to allow ourselves a glimmer of hope, then join with others in creating a better world. We certainly wouldn't want to waste this opportunity, then wonder, "What if…?"

*~ Patricia Dines*

# Gathering Evidence of Toxics Harm

A key component of protecting ourselves is avoiding what threatens us. With toxics, this means first reducing the harmful products that we have in our homes and daily lives. However, because of toxics' widespread use, we can also be exposed involuntarily in various ways without even knowing it. Thus caring for ourselves and others also requires that we take community-level action that lowers the overall release of toxics.

Is the level of harm really that serious? Here are some recent studies that confirm the conclusion that the negative impacts are significant and the need for change urgent.

### Autism Linked to Toxics Exposure

According to *Scientific American*, a 2008 University of California study found that California's dramatic increase in autism can't be explained by changes in medical diagnoses and is most likely due to fetal and infant exposure to pesticides, viruses, and household chemicals.

Dozens of chemicals in our environment are neurodevelopmental toxics (which means that they alter how the brain grows), including mercury, PCBs, lead, brominated flame retardants, and pesticides. Direct correlations have been found between exposure and autism. For instance, one study found that mothers of autistic children were twice as likely to use toxic pet flea shampoos.

Autism has serious effects, says the article, "not just on an individual child's health but on education, health care, and the economy." More than 3,000 new autism cases were reported in California in 2006, compared with 205 in 1990, and the increase shows no signs of plateauing.

The surge in autism is similar to that in childhood asthma, which *Scientific American* says "has reached epidemic proportions." Experts conclude that that increase is also not from increased reporting, and suspect pollutants as a cause. *("New Study: Autism Linked To Environment," By Marla Cone, Scientific American, Jan. 9, 2008. <www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=autism-rise-driven-by-environment>)*

### Chemicals Hurting San Francisco Wildlife

*Scientific American* also reports evidence of a key reason for the plummeting of San Francisco Bay's striped bass population since the 1970s. According to a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, fish mothers are passing damaging pollutants from the water to their young.

Pollution from industry and agricultural runoff has long been seen as a key cause of striped bass and other fish deaths. Now University of California scientists have discovered that contaminants are in female fish eggs at levels high enough to cause biological harm. These include PCBs, PDBEs (flame retardants), and various pesticides, including the banned but still lingering DDT. Tests show that baby fish inherit these pollutants, harming their smaller brains and livers, and likely causing early deaths. The report says that these chemicals accumulate in all kinds of fish and fowl. *(<www.sciam.com/blog/60-second-science/post.cfm?id=troubled-waters-striped-bass-moms-p-2008-11-24>)*

This hazard is echoed in a 2008 study which found that peregrine falcon eggs and chicks (in San Francisco and elsewhere) have dangerously high levels of the toxic PDBE flame retardants found in consumer products, such as synthetic fabrics, foam mattresses, and electronics. *("Flame retardant found in peregrine falcon eggs," By Jane Kay, SF Chronicle, May 8, 2008.)*

## Spring Detox

The **STEP Online Index** is overflowing with information to help you live less-toxically. Check there for tips on creating a vibrant garden or lawn, healthier (and often cheaper) spring cleaning, pet care without toxics, and much more. <www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html>.

## Removing the Barriers to Regulatory Action

A past Breast Cancer Action newsletter included an enthusiastic review of the book, *How Everyday Products Make People Sick: Toxins at Home and in the Workplace*, by Paul D. Blanc, MD. In this book, says the review, "Blanc uses case studies of common products to show that their hazards are frequently identified, but regulation of their use to prevent harm is routinely thwarted."

Blanc describes four strategies used by industry proponents to hinder addressing toxics' negative effects: (1) Create doubt by attacking evidence as "junk science" or seeking to counter scientific consensus; (2) Blame the victim and declare regulation too costly; (3) Label those advocating for a safer environment as unrealistic visionaries or opponents of technological progress; and (4) Argue that any needed action will naturally come from market corrections.

The book describes example situations where these four approaches have been applied, leading to countless illnesses and deaths with few penalties. Blanc ends with a call for strengthening regulatory agencies, reversing their systematic dismantling under the Bush administration.

## ABOUT STEP

**The Next STEP** (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program** (STEP). **STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

**Newsletter Editor, Lead Writer & Layout:** Patricia Dines, Email <STEP@healthyworld.org>

**Newsletter Editorial Team:** Patricia Dines and Jim Gleaves

**Newsletter Design Concept & Logo Design**: Lyn Dillin (neé Bougereau)

**STEP Founders:** Michael Black, Patricia Dines, Rebecca Dwan, Jeff Edelheit, Nan Fuchs, Craig Litwin, and Larry Robinson.

*STEP, P. O. Box 1776, Sebastopol CA 95473 <www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us>*

*Printed on recycled paper.*