

EPA Dumps Chemical Data System

Ignoring recommendations in two reports, EPA is handing over the system to industry in a move that critics say will lead to chaos

A dispute over a unique chemical data base operated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been abruptly settled. Ignoring, or at least short-circuiting, recommendations in two recent panel reports assessing the system, EPA officials have decided to hand over operation of the data base to private contractors without providing any interim federal support to ease the transfer. These actions have greatly frustrated some users and supporters of the system, who argue that it will become more costly and may deteriorate without a federal sponsor.

The data base, which has been at EPA since 1973, is known as the chemical information system (CIS). It consists of about 20 chemical data bases containing a uniquely wide variety of physical and regulatory data on some 350,000 compounds. Most other chemical information systems provide either references or a small fraction of the numeric data available on CIS. The system is accessible around the clock, and thus, for example, it is used during environmental emergencies, although its applicability is much broader. Federal agencies account for about 40 percent of CIS use, and industry (mainly chemical companies), universities, and other government agencies around the world account for the rest. Altogether there are more than 600 subscribers. CIS, which originated at the National Institutes of Health, has been managed since 1982 by an interagency board, whose role has been limited to advising EPA.

In recent months some agency officials have been saying the system has been seriously mismanaged, and they convened several outside panels to recommend what to do with it (*Science*, 3 August, p. 483). Critics of EPA, including members of the panels, now accuse the agency of using the reports as a "smoke screen" and ignoring their recommendations.

The first of two panels convened by EPA, consisting of users drawn from chemical companies and other representatives of the private sector, stated that CIS has "considerable inherent value. With itemized improvements, [it] could serve the significant need for a high quality, integrated, scientific and technical chemical information system." The

report laid out several options but recommended that EPA continue to manage the program. One recommended option was for the agency to continue making policy decisions for CIS but for operating decisions to be implemented by another government agency, a professional society, or a private vendor. The panel also strongly recommended against fragmenting the system and said that the government must continue to make chemical data publicly available.

The second panel, consisting of representatives from government agencies that use or have an interest in the system, did not agree with the first panel that the government is "responsible" for

"The two data bases soon will not be the same. For me, as an agency coordinator, it means we will be needing both. That means twice the overhead and twice the work."

ensuring the existence of such a chemical information system. It recommended that the system be turned over to the private sector "as soon as practical." However, the panel also recommended that "another agency" administer the program temporarily because "adequate resources must be made available by EPA and other agencies to ensure the viability and integrity of the system during the transition period."

EPA official Sarah Kadec says that the agency "tried to merge the recommendations of the two reports" in formulating its decisions. Critics, including some panel members, disagree. "Neither of the reports was followed," asserts one close observer, who asked not to be named. Moreover, what was recommended in the drafts of the two reports "did not appear in the final documents," he says. "Nuances" crept in during editing so that important but subtle findings and recommendations were either changed or dropped. A key recommen-

dation, that the government continue to act as "coordinator or sponsor" of the system even after it is moved into the private sector, was omitted, he points out.

"Obviously we didn't get another agency to do that," Kadec says. "No one wanted to take it, and EPA couldn't direct someone to do it." She adds that at least one willing recipient, the National Science Foundation, was overruled by the Office of Management and Budget.

By the end of November, EPA will stop sponsoring the system. So far, two private contractors, Fein-Marquart Associates of Baltimore and Information Consultants Incorporated (ICI) of Washington, D.C., have stepped in to fill the void. Both companies have worked on the system under contract to EPA. Although the agency has granted the companies equal rights to the data base, each company is free to decide what components will be made available to subscribers.

Each has formulated a slightly different plan for the system's future, and neither company is bound to leave the system intact. For example, Fein-Marquart has plans to put new mass spectral data into its version, and ICI plans to put the contents of the Merck Index on-line.

Users are claiming that this will "put the system in chaos." According to Laurence Dusold of the Food and Drug Administration, who served on the government panel and is a long-time user of the system, "The two data bases soon will not be the same. For me, as an agency coordinator, it means we will be needing both. That means twice the overhead and twice the work." He also mentions another concern, that unprofitable but scientifically valuable components of the system are likely to be dropped. "Where does that put national data needs?"

EPA's decision may not be the final word, however. A proposal to move the system over to the National Library of Medicine gained some support in Congress but narrowly missed consideration in the legislative chaos before adjournment. Several members of Congress have maintained keen interest in CIS, and their frustrations over the way it has been handled could revive the proposal next year.—JEFFREY L. FOX