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## Capitol Connection

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### Will the Chemical Safety Improvement Act improve chemical safety?

June 10, 2013 | Author: Summer Allen, Graduate and Postdoc, Brown University



On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, Senators Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and David Vitter (R-LA) announced legislation that proposes to modernize the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). The Chemical Safety Improvement Act of 2013 is co-sponsored by a mix of [20 Republican and Democrat Senators](#). If passed, the [act](#) would “for the first time, ensure that all chemicals are screened for safety to protect public health and the environment, while also creating an environment where manufacturers can continue to innovate, grow, and create jobs.”

The original TSCA legislation was passed by Congress in 1976 and has been widely criticized both by environmentalists and by the chemical industry for being ineffective. The original law was supposed to give the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the power to test and regulate potentially hazardous chemicals but was written in such a way that the EPA can only ask for safety testing on a chemical if there is existing evidence that the chemical may put people at risk. This means that the [“EPA has only been able to require testing for roughly 200 of the more than 84,000 chemicals currently registered in the United States, and has been able to ban only five dangerous substances since TSCA was first enacted in 1976.”](#)

The newly proposed legislation would require that all chemicals currently on the market and all new chemicals be tested for safety and would give the EPA the teeth to regulate hazardous chemicals—from requiring detailed labeling to outright banning chemicals. The bill also has provisions for streamlining the introduction of new chemicals to the marketplace and for the protection of trade secrets and intellectual property.

According to the Washington Post, the Chemical Safety Improvement Act might be [“the first major environmental law enacted since the 1990s.”](#) Although, as the Washington Post editorial notes, [some environmental](#) groups are wary of this bill. They are concerned by the lack of deadlines for assessing the safety of chemicals already on the market, what they consider inappropriate standards for deeming a chemical hazardous, and the possible restrictions on individual states from further regulating and labeling harmful chemicals, among other issues. However the bill does have the support of the [Environmental Defense Fund](#).

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Chemistry Council also [support](#) the bill. As the [press release](#) for the bill points out, chemistry is big business for the U.S.: “Chemicals are used to produce 96 percent of all manufactured goods consumers rely on every day and over 25 percent of the U.S. GDP is derived from industries that rely on chemicals.”

And yet increased knowledge about the lack of chemical regulation in this country has led to widespread chemophobia. As Deborah Blum pointed out in a recent [Wired article](#), “The cost of our inadequate system of chemical regulation – not to mention the way we’ve skimmed on honest investigation – has brought us to a point that the word “chemical” itself has become something to be feared.” A new federal chemical safety bill—with appropriate regulatory teeth—could help combat this fear of chemicals (and maybe help employ some of the many [unemployed chemists](#) in regulatory positions).

Senator Lautenberg was trying to update federal chemical safety standards since 2005. Unfortunately, the longtime public health advocate won’t be able to see whether this bill becomes a law, as he died on June 3<sup>rd</sup>.

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