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Impasse Persists on Drugs in Drinking Water

By HILLARY ROSNER

Five years after the federal government convened a task force to study the risks posed by pharmaceuticals in the environment, it is no closer to understanding the problem or whether these contaminants should be regulated under the Clean Water Act. That's the finding of a [new report](#) from the Government Accountability Office.

Many studies [have found traces of pharmaceuticals](#), including antibiotics, hormones, and antidepressants, in municipal water supplies over the past few years. Some cities have instituted take-back programs enabling residents to drop off unused medications. Still, the extent of the contamination and whether it poses a risk to human health remains unclear.

"People are hungry for information," said David C. Trimble, director of natural resources and environment at the Government Accountability Office, which produced the study at the request of two lawmakers, Representatives Edward Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Brad Miller, Democrat of North Carolina.

A government work group called Pharmaceuticals in the Environment was convened in 2006 and included representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency, which regulates drinking water; the Food and Drug Administration; and six other federal agencies. According to the G.A.O., the group generated a draft report that was never released because of internal squabbling.

The E.P.A. regulates only one component of pharmaceuticals, lindane, an ingredient in delousing shampoos. For every other pharmaceutical, from painkillers to cancer drugs, there is no standard for how much is acceptable in the nation's rivers and streams or in the water that comes out of Americans' taps.

A G.A.O. report issued in July noted that the E.P.A. has added only one new drinking water contaminant to its list of regulated substances since 1996. That was perchlorate, a component of rocket fuel; the E.P.A., reversing a controversial Bush administration decision, [announced in February](#) that it would begin regulating it.

Thursday's G.A.O. report calls for the creation of a new, permanent interagency task force to research the health impacts of drugs on the nation's drinking water.

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