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NOTE: MEDIA TELECONFERENCE AT 10:15 A.M.; RSVP TO tgalluzzo@iowapolicyproject.org

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Swimming in Uncertainty Addressing Organic Wastewater Contaminants in Iowa's Water

IOWA CITY, Iowa (Dec. 1, 2009) — Sweet smells may mask potential hazards delivered from cologne, perfume or shampoo washed down the drain are being ignored as environmental regulation has not kept pace with industry's drive to promote personal products.

A new report from the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project cautions that recent public attention to the serious problem of flushing pharmaceuticals into the wastewater stream is missing larger issues.

William Wombacher, an civil/environmental engineer and former student operator at the University of Iowa's drinking-water treatment plant, said so-called OWCs — organic wastewater contaminants — are reaching Iowans' water taps without regulation and without sufficient research to understand potential threats.

"The rivers, lakes and drinking water of our country contain low levels of hundreds of compounds about which we know very little," Wombacher said. "In decades, when we finally have a better grasp of this problem, we may decide that this is no problem at all. Or, ill effects to humans and the environment may show us it's a big problem. Either way, we have work to do."

Wombacher said the economic and environmental climate for regulation of toxic substances is much different from that when most U.S. regulations were passed in the 1970s.

"More than 30 years have passed since many of our statutes were passed. Since then our problems have changed," he said. "So, too, must our approach to regulation. Without it, the problems will be self-perpetuating."

The report, "[Swimming in Uncertainty](#)," said current toxic and hazardous waste law can be effective, but most have obstacles to passage of regulations. Some jurisdictions, including the state California and the European Union (EU), have taken alternative approaches.

A 1986 law passed in California, for example, requires regularly updated listings of compounds found to cause cancer or harm reproductive health, and bans their discharge into any water that ultimately will be used as a drinking-water source. In the EU, meanwhile, legislation passed in 2007 sets a preference for avoiding unnecessary health and environmental risk ahead of economic concerns.

The report recommends, for effective regulation of such contaminants:

- Information-gathering requirements, and proof of human and environmental safety, before a chemical is marketed.
- Re-evaluation requirements beyond the initial registration of chemicals.

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- Citizen suit provisions to aid enforcement, and public-notice (labeling) provisions.
- Re-evaluation of thousands of chemicals already in use that have skipped past review due to deficiencies in current regulations.
- Nationwide testing, evaluation and monitoring for the presence of OWCs in the environment and drinking water. Such work would augment efforts already being undertaken by the U.S. Geological Survey.

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and policy analysis organization in Iowa City, with its reports on economic opportunity, budget and tax policy, and energy and environmental issues on the web at www.iowapolicyproject.org.

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Available on Iowa Policy Project website after 10:15 a.m.:

Full Report <http://www.iowapolicyproject.org/2009docs/091201-OWC.pdf> (15-pg PDF)

Executive Summary <http://www.iowapolicyproject.org/2009docs/091201-OWC-xs.pdf> (4-pg PDF)

News Release <http://www.iowapolicyproject.org/2009docs/091201-OWC-release.pdf> (2-pg PDF)