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Evaluation of the Consumer Product Safety Database

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Evaluation of the Consumer Product Safety Database

Committee on Energy and Commerce, Democratic Staff

In August 2008, Congress passed and President Bush signed into law the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, strengthening the ability of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to identify product hazards and remove dangerous products from the marketplace. The law required that the CPSC create an online database for consumers, health care professionals, and public safety officials to report safety hazards and incidents involving consumer products.

The CPSC SaferProducts.gov database went live on March 11, 2011. For the first time, reports about dangerous products are now publicly available to parents and other concerned consumers. The database is also improving the commission's ability to identify trends in product hazards quickly and efficiently.

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives is expected to soon vote on the FY 2012 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations bill. This bill contains a provision that would shut down the new database by barring CPSC from using any funds "to carry out any of the activities" related to the database. Consumer organizations have described the possible elimination of the database as "a giant step backwards for consumer safety protections."¹

To assess the new consumer safety database, Democratic Committee staff analyzed the most recent data available online, the consumer product incidents reported to the CPSC over a three-month period from the database's launch on March 11, 2011, to June 7, 2011. This report, the first analysis of the database since its creation, summarizes the staff's key findings.

The database contains more than 1,600 incident reports. During its first three months of operation, consumers, health care professionals, public safety officials, and others reported 1,624 incidents that CPSC then published in the online database. Almost one-third of these incidents involved reports of death or injury.

The database contains 11 reports of incidents that resulted in fatalities. These fatality reports include accounts of infants who died in cribs and playpens and teenagers and adults who were killed while riding ATVs. One report describes a death caused by carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty furnace.

The database contains an additional 483 reports of incidents that resulted in an injury. The reports include incidents in which children suffered amputations or injuries to their fingers when their hands became trapped in the hinges of strollers. Numerous people reported ATV accidents resulting in serious injuries and hospitalization. Other consumers reported ankle and knee injuries from footwear. Most of these incidents required some level of medical attention.

Many other incident reports describe product defects that could cause injury. One consumer reported that the hinges on a safety gate broke, causing the gate to fall down the stairs. A mother reported that a hair dryer started sparking while she was using it to dry her daughter's hair. Another consumer reported that her front-loading washing machine had burned her clothes. Many consumers reported light fixtures, small appliances, and electronics that began over-heating and smoking with normal use.

Kitchen products account for one-third of the incident reports. Other product categories receiving the most reports include home maintenance, nursery equipment, furniture and furnishings, and toys. See Table 1.

Table 1. Incidents Reported in the SaferProducts.gov Database: By Category

Product Category	No. of Incident Reports
Kitchen	545
Home Maintenance and Structures	204
Baby - Nursery Equipment and Supplies	161
Furniture, Furnishings, and Decorations	141
Toys and Children	119
Clothing and Accessories	112
Yard and Garden	101
Sports and Recreation	75
Electronics	73
Drywall	27
Personal Care	26
Containers and Packaging	15
Hobby	13
Fuel, Lighters, and Fireworks	11
Products at Public Facilities	1

Consumers, public safety officials, and others have filed incident reports. Consumers reported the vast majority of product safety incidents to this database, accounting for 1,571 (97%) of the incident reports. State and local agencies (18 reports), public safety officials (15 reports), health care professionals (12 reports), medical examiners (4 reports), and even child service providers (4 reports) also have reported incidents to the database.

The information in the incident reports is accurate. Opponents of the CPSC database have claimed that the database allows “companies and their brands to be unfairly characterized”² and that “the database could be filled with bogus reports.”³ But this is not occurring. Product manufacturers are given the opportunity to review and dispute information in incident reports before the reports are published online in the database. They have challenged the accuracy of only 202 reports. The CPSC has accepted in whole or part 154 of the manufacturers’ claims (over 75%) and took action by removing inaccurate information or not publishing the incident report in the database.

The information in the incident reports is detailed. Opponents of the database also have claimed that the database would be filled with reports by anonymous individuals that do not identify the specific products involved. This is also not occurring. More than 80% of the incident reports in the database include the product’s model or serial number. In addition, 82% of the persons filing reports have given the CPSC permission to release their contact information to the manufacturers.

Hundreds of thousands of consumers are using the database to obtain important information about product safety. According to CPSC officials, there have been more than 305,000 visits to the new website. The individuals visiting the website have conducted almost 1.8 million product searches. More than half of all site visits and almost half of all searches occurred in June 2011, indicating that the database is rapidly becoming more popular among consumers and others searching for critical product safety information.

The new CPSC consumer safety database has been available to the public for only a few months. During this short time period, consumers, public health officials, and others have already reported more than 1,600 product safety incidents – including hundreds that caused death or serious injury – and almost 300,000 consumers have searched the database for important public safety information. Efforts by House Republicans to eliminate this database would deprive the public and government officials of critical information needed to improve consumer safety.

¹ Consumer Federation of America and Consumers Union, Press Release, *House Appropriations Committee Votes to Gut Safety Database* (June 23, 2011).

² House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade, Testimony of Wayne Morris, Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers, *A Review of CPSIA and CPSC Resources* (Feb. 17, 2011).

³ Letter from Rosario Palmieri, Vice President, National Association of Manufacturers, to Members of Congress (Feb. 17, 2011).