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US AND CANADIAN GROUPS CALL FOR BAN ON FACE MASKS CONTAINING TOXIC NANOMATERIALS

Face masks designed to protect against COVID-19 should use properly registered ingredients and not expose users to nanomaterials at occupational exposure levels

MINNEAPOLIS—Today, leading environmental and human health advocacy groups from the United States and Canada provided detailed evidence about face masks containing potentially toxic nanoscale materials [in a letter](#) to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC). The groups demand a ban on the import and sale, as well as recall, of masks that contain nanographene, nanosilver and nanocopper, which could result in harms to human health from hours-long and daily inhalation of those nanomaterials by medical and civilian mask wearers.

As we enter a fourth wave of COVID-19 in the U.S., the authors of the letter strongly support the wearing of masks as a critical public health measure to protect against the transmission of the virus. However, masks must use properly registered ingredients and be authorized for use by U.S. agencies prior to U.S. import and sale.

The ETC Group in Canada aggregated data on U.S. imports of Shengquan Group masks to its U.S. subsidiaries. The company claims to produce three million masks per day from biomass graphene and has exported at least 55 shipments of its nanographene masks with the brand name “heal fiber” to the U.S. Based on the ETC Group analysis of Department of Commerce data, since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 600 million masks have been imported from this Chinese conglomerate, which advertises its use of nanographene in masks but does not consistently label the masks. It is impossible to know how many of those masks incorporate nanographene as a purported antiviral ingredient.

“Masks are an essential technology to defeat this pandemic but the longer the FDA leaves potentially unsafe masks on the market the more it undermines trust in mask-wearing and unnecessarily fuels conspiracies. A pandemic is no time to allow risky technological opportunism,” says Jim Thomas, research director at ETC Group.

The NGOs’ demand comes on the heels of events in the past six weeks involving masks made with antimicrobial nanomaterials, including: a recall in Belgium of masks containing nanoscale titanium dioxide and silver particles; a Canadian government advisory that masks containing graphene may pose health risks due to the inhalation of nanographene particles; a recall of millions of products containing nanographene in Nancy, France; and the Spanish Agency for Medicines and Health Products’ call for the

cessation of marketing and use of graphene surgical masks manufactured by Shandong Shengquan New Materials Co. Ltd.

“FDA, EPA and the CPSC know of the actions taken by their counterparts in Canada and Europe,” said Steve Suppan of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. “However, it is very likely that masks made with nanomaterial textiles, whether so labeled or not, are being exported to many other countries. U.S. agencies should help to ensure that the World Health Organization issues an alert to all of its member governments about the risks to human health from chronic inhalation exposure to these nanomaterials in masks, while urging that wearing masks without these nanomaterials is a critical component to combat the global pandemic.”

The three agencies should already be fully aware of the potential human toxicity resulting from chronic exposure to nanosilver, nanocopper and nanographene as used in masks. However, the agencies have not issued a conditional use permit nor conducted a voluntary pre-market safety consultation with manufacturers of nanotechnology-enabled textiles for use in masks, whether for medical personnel or for civilians.

“The FDA, EPA and CPSC must act to remove these toxic masks from the marketplace,” says Jaydee Hanson, policy director at the International Center for Technology Assessment & Center for Food Safety. “They have not been tested for either medical use or consumer use. You have the authority to take the thousands of these masks off the market. I should not be able to go to my neighborhood drug store and find such masks at the checkout counter.”

The International Center for Technology Assessment & Center for Food Safety, Institute on Agriculture and Trade Policy, ETC Group, Health Care Without Harm U.S and Friends of the Earth urge the EPA, USDA and CPSC to take precautionary actions for imported masks that have not undergone pre-market safety reviews and post-market surveillance by withdrawing these potentially toxic nanographene, nanosilver and nanocopper masks from the U.S. market. To read the letter, please visit: www.iatp.org/engineered-nanomaterials-masks-covid-19.

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