New Directions for Risk Assessment in the Incoming Administration and Beyond

THOMAS BURKE
Associate Dean for Public Health Practice and Training
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD

Over the past 25 years, Congress, the White House, and the general public have increasingly expected EPA and other federal and state agencies to use quantitative risk assessment (QRA) to set regulatory priorities and determine the stringency of individual regulations. Although risk assessment has greatly improved our ability to identify and control hazards to health, safety, and the environment, the risk assessment process has become bogged down by challenges to its timeliness and credibility, a lack of adequate resources, and disconnects between the available scientific data and the information needs of decision-makers. To mark the 25th anniversary of the publication by the National Research Council (NRC) of the influential “Red Book” (Risk Assessment in the Federal Government: Managing the Process), the NRC released the committee report Science and Decisions: Advancing Risk Assessment in December 2008.

Dr. Thomas Burke, chair of the new NRC committee, will summarize the Science and Decisions report, which makes significant recommendations both about the technical aspects of risk assessment (in particular, a new “unified approach” for quantifying risks from both carcinogenic and non-carcinogenic agents) and about increasing the utility of risk assessment for evaluating the merits of various concrete options for controlling hazards. Building on the recommendations of several earlier NRC reports, the Science and Decisions report also emphasizes the value of EPA increasing stakeholder involvement in both technical and decision-making arenas.