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Consumers uninformed about nanomaterials in common products

New CIELAP report calls for mandatory labeling of nanomaterials in cosmetics, personal care products, and cleaning agents

(Toronto, May 21, 2008) – In Canada, approximately 80 companies have been identified as working on products that contain nano-materials. The Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) released a report today its report entitled *Update on a Framework for Canadian Nanotechnology Policy*. This paper examines gaps in nanotechnology policy in Canada and makes a number of recommendations for the Canadian government, including the mandatory labeling of nanomaterials in selected products.

“This field is so new that very little is known about the behaviour of nanoparticles in the environment,” says Susan Holtz, CIELAP Senior Policy Analyst and author of the report. “Substances at the nanoscale are more biologically reactive and toxic than at the (larger) micro- or macro-scale. Tissue damage to lungs, brains, and hearts has been found in animal species exposed to carbon nanotubes and buckyballs and a 2005 study of buckyballs in the environment discovered that they are toxic to soil bacteria.”

Coatings and powders containing nanoscale particles are now being used in consumer products to make fabrics stain-resistant or for ultraviolet protection in sunscreen and cosmetic creams. Nanoscale silver inhibits bacterial growth and is used to coat wound dressings.

While no one knows whether the nanomaterials in sunscreens and other personal care products are toxic or otherwise harmful, a comprehensive regulatory regime won't be in place in Canada for some time. Even cosmetic labels, for which Canada now requires full ingredient disclosure, are not required to reveal the use of nano-scale particles. Neither do other products, including food. The federal government has been making some positive progress on regulating nanotechnologies but CIELAP believes there are a number of areas where interim measures should be initiated much more quickly.

CIELAP's paper provides seven timeline benchmarks for its recommendations to government. These include:

- a Canadian inventory of nano activities and products (by May 2009);
- worker safety and public health guidelines for research and industry (by August 2009);
- the banning of nanomaterials in food and some food packaging (by November 2009); and
- mandatory labeling of nanomaterials in cosmetics, personal care products, and cleaning agents (by May 2010).

“Over the past decade we've seen an enormous expansion in research and development of nanotechnology,” says Anne Mitchell, Executive Director of CIELAP. “Nanotechnology has great potential to contribute to breakthroughs in medicine, electronics, energy conservation and environmental clean-up. But caution is needed. It's a great worry that products are being developed without much obvious concern for possible problems, and that nanomaterials are already being sold in consumer products when there are so many unknowns.”

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This brief 11-page report is available at www.cielap.org.

Founded in 1970, the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) is an independent environmental law and policy research and education organization.

Media Backgrounder:

Nanotechnology refers to the manipulation of materials at the nanoscale, the scale of atoms and molecules. It is valuable because at this scale materials can exhibit novel properties that are different from the same substance's properties at the macro or even micro scales. Since 2006, the number of consumer products using nanotechnology has almost tripled from 212 to more than 600. Many more products are expected in fields including medical applications, cosmetics, industrial coatings and environmental sensors and remediation.