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EMERGING CONTAMINANTS: SCIENCE AND POLICY

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ABSTRACT: Industrial science and technology, through their creation and use of chemical compounds not found in nature, have created a new public health risk termed "emerging contaminants." Advances in detection methods have allowed the identification of numerous such compounds in the global fresh water resources. Though these compounds have not been traditionally considered water pollutants requiring regulation, they are fast becoming one of the greatest threats to the world's water resources. The vast array of chemical manipulations used to create new goods has produced a diverse collection of thousands of chemical substances that are believed to be accumulating in the environment. The various effects of these contaminants are poorly understood and research is being conducted to identify their health effects, occurrence, persistence, fate, and transport. The mix of chemicals is continually changing, with new ones added constantly, compounding the problem further. The term emerging contaminants is loosely defined, but it generally includes chemicals that are not yet subject to monitoring and regulation, but that are likely to have adverse effects on human health and the environment. The nature and scope of the problem renders it intractable by means of traditional regulation that typically requires lengthy and complex processes before a specific chemical compound is classified as a pollutant. There are, however, alternative pre- and post-market approaches that hold some promise for identifying and mitigating the risks from emerging contaminants.

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