

# U.S. CPSC's Searchable Public Database

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Good afternoon! My name is Ming Zhu. I'm the Phase I Project Manager for our new searchable public database. I'm excited to be talking to you about the database and how it will help keep consumers informed and their families safe. This database is one of the top priorities of our Chairman, Inez Tenenbaum. Her three goals are consumer education and outreach, government transparency, and fair but vigorous enforcement, and this database helps us meet all three priorities. But one caveat: I'm an IT guy, not a lawyer, and these views are my own. They have not been reviewed by -- and do not reflect the views of -- the Commission.

Once we're finished, our database will empower consumers and save lives -- something we are really excited about. The database will give consumers access to far more information so they can make informed choices. And this information will be shared much, much faster -- which is critical when you're responding to hazards.

First, a little background: Congress established the CPSC in 1972. Congress charged us with protecting the public against

unreasonable risk of injury associated with consumer products, which now number around fifteen thousand types.

We receive thousands of reports each year from health care professionals, public safety workers, and ordinary consumers. We can't investigate every single report, so we try to focus on the greatest hazards. And we issue recalls for the most hazardous products.

This business model has worked very well. Over the past 30 years, in partnership with consumer advocates like CFA, we've seen a 30% decrease in deaths and injuries from consumer related products<sup>1</sup> – give yourselves a hand!

But every year our work becomes harder:

- First, there are more products. Consumers have more gadgets, and toys today are very different than those that we used to play with. This means that we have to monitor

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Hal Stratton, IECEE newsletter, <http://www.iecee.org/whatsnew/PDF/product-safety.pdf>, and amazon.com review of CPSC CD-ROMs, <http://www.amazon.com/Consumer-Product-Safety-Commission-CPSC/dp/1422017222>

hundreds of additional types of products that didn't exist when we started.

- Second, Congress has given us more responsibilities in rulemaking and enforcement;
- Third, manufacturing is now global. We now have to monitor entry of products at our borders, not just consumer products entering our stores. When we were created, most toys were made in the U.S; now ninety percent are made abroad. We have to train foreign manufacturers on U.S. standards, and we have to work with U.S. Customs and Border Protection to catch dangerous products as they enter our ports by sea, land, and air. This means logistical, communications, and enforcement challenges far greater than anything envisioned in 1972.

For years, the hardworking and dedicated staff of the CPSC have been creatively doing the best we can with a budget smaller than most Federal agencies.

Let me tell you how we manage and investigate a hazard report now, and how those limitations impact our work. When a consumer is injured, they file an report online. We review the report to look for trends and to decide the next steps. We have an Early Warning System to look for patterns, but it only covers three types of products. Manufacturers are notified but not very engaged, even though they are a source of information. And we have to search for archived research in at least five different disconnected databases. Since we lack case management software, it is not easy to track an investigation of a product. Finally, if any members of the public want to see what information we have on a product, they have to file a FOIA request, so we spend a lot of time replying to them.

But Congress passed the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act or CPSIA in 2008 with help from many of you. CPSIA requires us to create a searchable database of reports of harm. It requires us to transmit reports of harm to manufacturers for comment, and then to post them online very quickly.

Let me give you an idea of what we have in mind once the public database is online and once we complete the IT modernization we need.

First, the consumer reports a product hazard through our public database. Then, the manufacturer is sent a copy of the report and given an opportunity to comment. That way, CPSC can begin research with the benefit of information from the manufacturer. Plus, our expanded Early Warning System will help us detect patterns in hazard reports from many different types of products. Our enhanced case management system and updated IT systems will help more CPSC departments access archived research on similar cases and respond more quickly. And most important, consumers will have access to all our hazard reports, manufacturer comments, safety alerts, and recall information when they're shopping so they can avoid buying hazardous products in the first place.

This is a huge change for us. We're changing our business model to improve our ability to protect consumers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. Our original model focused on recalls. We received reports, we investigated the worst ones, and we recalled the most hazardous products. Generally, the public didn't know about the report unless we issued a recall.

Our new model is proactive, and it emphasizes prevention, not just recalls. It relies on consumer education and government transparency. It relies on consumer groups like all of you to help get the word out. And it gives consumers the information to make smart choices, and it allows them to be with us on the front lines, to be partners in our efforts to keep their families safe.

We will still investigate and issue recalls. But consumers will also have lots of new information about the public's experience with products whether or not we take any additional action.

Now, to make sure that the database is as useful as possible to our end users, we have already begun outreach. In November,

we held public hearings to find out how manufacturers, retailers, and consumer advocates expected to use the database and how they thought it should work. And in January, we invited dozens of manufacturers, retailers, and consumer advocates to participate in staff workshops to discuss details like how the reporting form should look, how manufacturers would be notified; and how we should handle any inaccurate information. Soon, we will use focus groups to help us understand how different types of end users will use the database.

Until the database is live, we've launched a new website, SaferProducts.gov, where you'll be able to find the information you need to keep your members in the loop. We'll also preview some of the pages and functionality of the database before we go live with it in March 2011. Eventually, this site will become the public face of the database. We hope you'll use the site to make your members aware of the information that will soon be available.

I want to give you a little sneak preview into how the database might work. We don't have PowerPoint slides today, but there will be storyboards available soon on SaferProducts.gov.

Let's say you log on to SaferProducts.gov to report an injury. First, we'll find out what type of product caused a problem so we can put you in touch with the right agency.

If it's one of the 15,000 types of products we regulate, we'll ask you how you want to submit a report: online, via email, by phone, or by postal mail.

If you agree to complete the online form, we'll assess your role: you might be the injured party or a family member, the owner of a potentially defective product, a manufacturer or retailer, a public safety official, or a medical examiner or coroner.

Then we'll ask about the severity of the incident, the date and location, and the type of injury. Then we'll ask about the product, including the brand, the manufacturer, and the retailer. We'll ask you to upload pictures of the product. We'll capture

your contact information, and that of your parent or guardian if you are a child submitting a report on behalf of an adult.

If we have a problem with any data, we'll ask you to go back and fix it, and we may suggest possible corrections. Then we'll ask you to review the report, to verify that it's accurate, and consent to its use in the public database.

You'll receive a Report Number, and a copy in your email. You will be able to go back and amend it if you want to add or correct anything.

As more and more reports come in and become available to the public, the database will give consumers a tremendous new tool to find out whether the products in their homes or ones they are considering buying may have any unaddressed safety problems.

So when will all this happen? Right now, we're incorporating the feedback we've received and working on completing what we call Phase I. Phase I is not just the database itself, but also a warehouse of our archived data, and an early warning system to

help us recognize patterns and respond more quickly. We're hustling to get all that developed in time to meet the projected release date, which is March 2011.

All those changes turn on the fire hose of incident reports. Phase II lets us hopefully drink from it without being overwhelmed. While these might change, we're looking at four components. First, we will improve our document management so all our reports from different sources get classified automatically. Second, we set up a new case management system; third, we will improve our use of industry data. We want to remove recalled products from shelves and retail websites automatically. Finally, we're working to expand our Early Warning System. We hope these four approaches will help us manage much more information from the public. That's Phase Two.

Last, I want to briefly mention a few other related initiatives. First, we are planning a major redesign of our main website, CPSC.gov to make it easier to find what you need. Second is an

area called Taxonomy. We're working to put all our archived information into the right boxes with the right labels.

Finally, we are expanding our use of social media to share all this information. We want consumers to see our websites as the first place to go to find information about their products.

So... we are categorizing vast amounts of information, making it available through an easier to use website and more powerful search tools, and using social media on the Internet to share information with consumers. This is all part of our new overall emphasis on public education and transparency. If we do it right, we're going to save a lot of lives and keep consumers much safer in an increasingly challenging environment.

You can see that we've put a lot of thought into the creation of the public database and our overall IT modernization in an effort to improve public access to product safety information.

But we're a small agency, and we cannot make this happen without all of you. We are asking you to communicate with

your members and your staff about the public database and help them understand what a powerful tool it will be. We hope you'll talk about it at your board meetings and conferences, in your newsletters and websites. And please let us know all the ways your members plan to use the database so we can continue to improve it. We're looking for formal feedback on Phase II starting this fall. Please watch for an NPR – a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking – to come out in the next few months.

So that's it. Thanks a lot to CFA for having me here.