The online magazine Yale Environment 360 has published an informative and rather frightening interview with Frederick vom Saal, a biologist at the University of Missouri's Endocrine Disruptors Group, about bisphenol-A and what he sees as a completely broken regulatory system for managing hazards from chemicals. Elizabeth Kolbert, known recently for her stellar journalism in the New Yorker about climate change's causes and impacts, interviewed Professor vom Saal, a leading researcher in the field, about his work on BPA. The chemical, found in polycarbonate plastic bottles (and some metal water bottles) and in the lining of food and beverage cans, is known to be an estrogen-mimicking substance. Professor vom Saal believes — with ample evidence supporting his view — that BPA is an extremely dangerous chemical and should be banned from consumer products.

While Dr. vom Saal discusses the perils of relying on industry-supported research as well as other reasons why he believes BPA isn't effecticely regulated, his deepest frustrations about BPA stem from the broad failures in our regulatory system. Our primary federal chemical regulation statute, TSCA, isn't effective at all in addressing chemical risks, and least of all the risks from the approximately 60,000 human-created chemicals that already existed at the time TSCA was enacted. As EPA administrator Lisa Jackson testified recently to a Congressional committee:

> TSCA does not have a mandatory program where EPA must conduct a review to determine the safety of existing chemicals. In addition, TSCA places legal and procedural requirements on EPA before the Agency can request the generation and submission of health and environmental effects data on existing chemicals.

TSCA reform, perennially discussed, is unlikely to pass in Congress anytime soon. But EPA is working hard, after decades of inaction, to remedy some of TSCA's defects through new strategies for exercising its existing administrative authority more aggressively, as Tim Malloy has noted. With respect to BPA in particular, both the federal Food and Drug Administration and the EPA at least acknowledged this year, for the first time, that BPA may pose real risks, and EPA is moving forward with a plan to begin to evaluate and address those risks (though the plan does not come close to actually regulating BPA yet).

At the state level, California could regulate the chemical regardless of what the

federal government does, but only by passing new legislation. State Senator Fran Pavley introduced a bill this year, SB 797, that would have banned BPA from children's drinking vessels. The bill failed to pass. And even that bill wouldn't, however, have addressed the ubiquitous presence of the chemical in our canned goods (as Dr. vom Saal discusses in the interview). It's hard to be optimistic about our ability to protect ourselves from emerging risks such as nanotechnology, given our poor record at understanding and regulating risks from chemicals that have been around for decades.