The chemicals that make life easier by keeping food from sticking to cookware and blocking stains to carpets and couches also have a darker side: Some of their ingredients don’t break down in nature. And the accumulation of these manufacturing aids, called perfluorocarboxylates, is potentially hazardous to humans and wildlife (Science, 10 December 2004, p. 1887).

Last month, DuPont, the largest manufacturer of perfluorocarboxylates, agreed to spend $5 million to assess one aspect of the possible risk of exposure. It’s part of a record $16.5 million settlement reached last month with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which had accused the company of breaking the law by not releasing health information about perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), a perfluorocarboxylate used to make some Teflon products. DuPont has denied any wrongdoing.

The research could potentially lead EPA to require DuPont and other manufacturers to reformulate some products, with a value exceeding $1 billion. “Ultimately, these research results could have a huge influence on regulation,” says Scott Mabury of the University of Toronto, Canada.

While welcoming the research, which will involve nine representative DuPont products, some researchers are frustrated by EPA’s ground rules. They are particularly upset that the identity of the products to be tested will be kept secret, a decision they say could reduce confidence in the findings and hinder other research into the chemicals. “It really stifles investigation,” says Timothy Kropf, a toxicologist with the Environmental Working Group in Washington, D.C. It will also make it harder for outsiders to evaluate and interpret EPA’s conclusions, adds Richard Luthy of Stanford University in California.

The contract labs hired by DuPont will cook each product in a warm brew of aerobic microbes—conditions designed to maximize the chance that they will break down into PFOA or a dozen intermediate metabolites that might suggest that PFOA is a possible outcome. If breakdown products do turn up, says Charles Auer, director of EPA’s Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics, the agency will consider more tests to figure out the rate and extent of the process. (DuPont says that PFOA comes from acci-

**SPACE SCIENCE**

**NASA Terminates Gore’s Eye on Earth**

NASA has quietly terminated a controversial Earth-gazing science mission left over from the Clinton Administration. Although the satellite is largely complete, space agency officials say they don’t have the money to launch and operate the spacecraft, which is designed to provide data on solar storms and the effect on climate of changes in Earth’s albedo.

The Deep Space Climate Observatory began life in March 1998 when then–Vice President Al Gore proposed a mission, called Triana, to beam back real-time images of the whole Earth. Ridiculed by Republicans as Goresat, the project was resuscitated after a 2000 report from the National Research Council of the National Academies said it could do important research. But last month, NASA science chief Mary Cleave wrote scientists that the mission remained a priority.

The observatory was designed to hover at a point where the gravity of the moon and Earth cancel each other out, providing a stable platform for observing the sunlit side of Earth on a continuous basis. “We could get an incredible set of data” of the impact of albedo on climate, says Robert Charlson, a climate scientist at the University of Washington, Seattle. The satellite would also have monitored solar storms that pose a hazard to sensitive telecommunications systems.

Principal investigator Francisco Valero of the University of California, San Diego, says that NASA is ignoring the possibility that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration—which last year requested a study on possible NOAA participation due out next month—could pick up as much as half the cost. “If there is cost-sharing, then the cost could be moderate for each agency,” Valero argues, noting that final preparation, launch, and operation of the mission could run between $60 million and $120 million. But NASA’s tight budget and the mission’s political roots may be too much for scientists to overcome.

—ANDREW LAWLER