

New US safety agency chief vows "firm" enforcement

Reuters

September 10, 2009

* *New CPSC chief vows "fair but firm" enforcement*

* *[China](#) meeting to focus on toys, [lead](#) content, fireworks*

* *Expanded imports surveillance, consumer self-reporting*

WASHINGTON - The [U.S.](#) Consumer Product Safety Commission is determined to shed its image as a weak and hesitant enforcer of standards and become the [world's](#) "leading lion of consumer protection," the new chairman of the commission said on Thursday.

Inez Tenenbaum, who took over the agency on June 23, said in prepared testimony for a U.S. House Commerce subcommittee hearing that she was committed to "fair but firm" enforcement of product safety laws. A copy of her testimony was obtained by Reuters.

The agency was heavily criticized during the Bush administration for failing to ensure the safety of toys, including many imported from China. Congress responded by passing a law in 2008 banning toxic chemicals known as phthalates in toys, cutting the amount of lead allowed in children's products and substantially boosting the agency's budget.

The commission is working with the [Chinese government](#) and Chinese manufacturers to develop a more comprehensive approach to product safety, Tenenbaum said.

Officials from both countries will meet Oct. 21-26 in China to identify ways for American importers and Chinese suppliers to establish a systemic way to prevent and detect safety hazards in product design, the [manufacturing](#) process, and the consumer's use of the product, Tenenbaum said. High on the agenda will be safety issues related to toys, lead content in children's products, all terrain vehicles, lighters and fireworks.

Meanwhile, the safety agency is investigating construction drywall imported from China that has been linked to corrosion of metal components and possible health problems, Tenenbaum said.

Nearly 1,200 [reports](#) of defective drywall have been received by the agency, mostly from homeowners in Florida, Louisiana and Virginia, she said. The agency is "pouring a record amount of [money](#) and manpower" into helping families affected by the defective drywall and working with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Customs, and state health departments.

Another priority is to make it easier for Americans to find out about potential dangers by creating a database of product safety problems, said Tenenbaum, a former South Carolina state [education](#) superintendent. "The new Web portal will be specifically designed to be easily accessible and usable by all Americans," she said.

In addition to the planned database, the agency wants to move faster to spot hazards by using predictive, data-mining [technology](#) to analyze information it receives. That means forming partnerships with [industry](#) and other government agencies to expand surveillance of imports and offering consumers user-friendly tools to [report](#) problems with products, she said.

In a sign of the commission's tougher stance in protecting consumers, in early June it fined Mattel Inc [MAT.N] \$2.3 million stemming from the toymaker's 2007 recall of up to 2 million Chinese-made toys and products, mainly for excessive lead in [paint](#). The settlement was the third-largest in the agency's history.

President [Barack Obama](#) has proposed boosting the number of agency commissioners to five from three, and increasing the commission's budget to \$107 million, a 71 percent jump from fiscal year 2007.

"I intend to continue the transformation of this agency from what some have described as a 'teething tiger' to the world's leading lion of consumer protection," Tenenbaum said.