Ratings not rattling D.C.

By Joe Puzianowski Tribune Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON -- The decision by Standard & Poor's to downgrade the U.S. credit rating may provoke some havoc in financial markets this week, but it's unlikely to prod Washington policymakers to take the unpopular steps required to cut the nation's debt.

S&P criticized an increasingly dysfunctional Congress by downgrading the U.S., but its decision also put a spotlight on a problem that the ratings service's calculations helped trigger the 2008 financial crisis.

A key to the political impact of the downgrade will be the reaction by Standard & Poor's to the recent ratings actions by Fitch and Moody's. S&P's decision also put a spotlight on a two-tiered credit rating industry whose miscalculation and overreliance on computer models helped trigger the 2008 financial crisis.

Treasury business columnist Phil Rothenberg offers a little help with war of words, and the Tribune offers a little help with war of words. To find a Target with fresh grocery, visit Target.com/storelocator.

Toxic metal stays in water

By Michael Hawthorne Tribune Staff Reporter

A cancer-causing substance, found at levels much higher than a California health standard, slips past city's treatment system.

Chicago's first round of testing for a toxic metal called hexavalent chromium found that levels in local drinking water are more than six times higher than a health standard California adopted last month.

But it could take years before anything is done about chromium contamination in Chicago's drinking water, in part because industrial polluters and municipal water utilities are lobbying to block or delay the Obama administration's move toward national regulations.

The discovery of hexavalent chromium in drinking water is renewing a debate about standards for unregulated substances that are showing up in water supplies nationwide. Potential health threats from many of the industrial chemicals, pharmaceutical drugs and herbicides still are being studied, but researchers say there is strong evidence that hexavalent chromium causes cancer.

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Chromium's threat to health, and industry's resistance to clean up the mess, are renewing a debate about standards for unregulated substances that are showing up in water supplies nationwide. Potential health threats from many of the industrial chemicals, pharmaceutical drugs and herbicides still are being studied, but researchers say there is strong evidence that hexavalent chromium causes cancer.

Chicago and other cities are compliance with the rule that aims to reduce chromium-6 levels in drinking water. The discovery of hexavalent chromium in drinking water is renewing a debate about standards for unregulated substances that are showing up in water supplies nationwide. Potential health threats from many of the industrial chemicals, pharmaceutical drugs and herbicides still are being studied, but researchers say there is strong evidence that hexavalent chromium causes cancer.

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Chicago began quarterly testing for a dozen common forms of chromium. But the Environmental Protection Agency says it will not require the city to do so because drinking water standards are determined by the U.S. Congress, sharply criticized the EPA for not acting, and added the pollutant to itssafer drinking water list.

Burke, associate dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, said that more than two dozen cities and industrial facilities in the Chicago area disperse hexavalent chromium, an industrial pollutant marked by the movie “Erin Brockovich.” The California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment defines the limit, 0.05 part per billion, as an amount that researchers agree poses no risk of the cancer known as bladder cancer. But others find it no less than a challenge. "We're asking our customers to drink water that we know is too toxic to protect them scientifically, to advance public health," said Burke, who has been appointed to a national water monitoring panel by President Obama. "It's no solution, it can take years to be replaced by filters, or it can be 100 years to replace the water system itself."

Most of the nation's water systems operate using standards that are not set by EPA but by the states and localities where the water systems are regulated. In some cases, this means that the city of Chicago, for example, can set its own limits, even if it means ignoring the EPA's list of most harmful chemicals. Burke and others say this is a problem because the federal government has not taken an aggressive stance on reducing the amount of pollutants that end up in drinking water.

Although treated sewage from Chicago's wastewater plants is supposed to leak into the waterways near the city, the water is not supposed to pass unfiltered through conventional treatment methods. Burke has been leading a national research effort to determine which substances, or contaminants, are detected in the nation's drinking water.

Chicagoans have sponsored their own studies of water, many of which conclude that more than 100 substances are detected in the area's drinking water. Some substances, such as hexavalent chromium, are not regulated because they are not considered to be harmful. Others, such as lead, are regulated but not monitored at the same level as other substances.

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