

Legislation would minimize impact of dangerous chemicals

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By MARGARET BAUMAN

Two bills introduced in the current Alaska Legislature session would phase out certain toxic flame retardant chemicals known to cause health problems which are found in consumer products such as furniture and electronics.

House Bill 63, introduced by Rep. Lindsey Holmes, D-Anchorage, and Senate Bill 27, introduced by Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage, target polybrominated diphenyl ethers, also known as PBDEs, which disrupt thyroid function and affect learning, memory and behavior.

The legislation would apply to mattresses, mattress pads and upholstered furniture containing plastic fibers that contain flame retardants and electronic products with plastic housing that contains flame retardants. It would not apply to transportation vehicles or products used in such equipment, nor products used in an industrial, mining or manufacturing process.

The legislation also calls for the state to develop a program to assist retailers in identifying products in their inventories that violate the chemical restrictions.

Children are particularly vulnerable to these flame retardant chemicals and safer and economical alternatives are available to replace the unnecessary use of hazardous flame retardants, according to Safer Chemicals Healthy Families and Safer States Coalitions, of which Alaska Community Action on Toxics is a member.

Similar legislation was introduced three years ago by former Alaska legislator Andrea Doll of Juneau, but never made it out of committee, said Pam Miller of Alaska Community Action on Toxics.

"We think this legislation is extremely important, especially in Alaska, because people are exposed to these chemicals through atmospheric transport," Miller said.

In addition to toxic chemicals which may be contained in the manufacture of furniture and electronics, Alaskans are already being exposed to higher levels of toxic chemicals because of prevailing atmospheric and oceanic conditions, which transport such toxics through the air and water to polar points of the planet, said Bob Shavelson, executive director of Cook Inletkeeper. It has to do with the Coriolis effect, caused by the rotation of the earth, which can carry toxic particles produced thousands of miles away into Alaska's atmosphere.

"We think that wildlife and people living in the north are getting a double whammy," said Miller, in part because of the atmospheric conditions that draw toxics to the Arctic, and in part because homes in Alaska are closed in for a great proportion of the year, and well insulated. Many studies show that people are exposed through indoor air and dust to flame retardant chemicals leaching out into the atmosphere and found in household air and dust, she said.

Miller also pointed to a 2009 study done by the Arctic Monitoring Assessment Program, which showed that women of childbearing age in Alaska's Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta had the highest levels of toxics in the circumpolar Arctic, Miller said.

The study, online at <http://epa.gov/osp/tribes/pres/webinar091210> shows how high levels of toxins are introduced into traditional subsistence foods.

Another study in the Gulf of Alaska found that orca whales have some of the highest concentrations of these toxic chemicals in the world, she said. Several studies have shown that the main environmental toxins of concern for populations of marine mammals are primarily persistent organic pollutants such as polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, polybrominated diphenyl ethers, or PBDEs and dioxins and furans, closely related chemicals that are produced when organic material is burned in the presence of chlorine. One common source of dioxins and furans is from coal fired utilities.

30 state consider legislation

Similar legislation to rid furniture and electronics of toxic chemicals being considered in a total of 30 states includes bans on BPA and hazardous flame retardants in consumer products, requirements that children's product manufacturers use only the safest chemicals, and resolutions urging Congress to overhaul the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act, the federal law that allows dangerous and untested chemicals to be used in everyday products and materials.

BPA is an abbreviation for Bisphenol A, an organic compound used to make polycarbonate plastic and epoxy resins. For more than two years now, several government reports have questioned its safety, particularly when fetuses, infants and young children are exposed to products containing BPA.

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State lawmakers propose ban on PBDE flame retardants

by Maria Downey

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While there's no question among safety advocates that flame retardants save lives, renewed health concerns about some retardants are causing Alaska to join states across the nation in trying to ban PBDE chemicals.

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PBDEs are invisible but they're used in the manufacturing of countless everyday objects like furniture , electronics and appliances.

Two state Legislature bills introduced late last session to ban PBDEs by 2012 -- [House Bill 63](#) and [Senate Bill 27](#) -- are now in committee.

“I don't think that most people realize that when they put a child to bed at night, they probably put them on a bed that is full of dangerous toxins,” said Sen. Bill Wielechowski. “I don't think most people realize when they're using their microwave, their cell phone, TV, their toaster -- even walking across their carpet -- they're being exposed to, they're exposing their family to very dangerous toxins.”

The Environmental Protection Agency's website reports that traces of PBDEs have been found in breast milk, along with fish and other wildlife.

Health issues linked to the chemicals include thyroid problems, learning and memory disabilities, behavioral changes, delayed puberty and other reproductive issues.

“Another thing about these toxins are, they are getting into our food chain,” said Rep. Lindsey Holmes, co-sponsor of House Bill 63. “They have been shown to have particularly high rates in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region of the state in Western Alaska, because they're getting into our salmon, they're getting into our other animals.”

Holmes and other state lawmakers are trying to do what 12 other states have already done and get PBDEs out of people's homes.

“Because currently, there are some safe alternatives out there and no reason to be using these,” Holmes said. “And the problem with these types of toxins, they're in our homes, which means our children are exposed to

them -- it also means if there's a fire, firefighters are exposed to the toxic chemicals.”

“Chemicals that can cause cancer, chemicals that can cause developmental disabilities -- and I think as lawmakers we have an obligation to stand up and say, ‘This is not something we want brought into our state,’” Wielechowski said.

“We want to do everything we can to protect families, protect the kids, protect the food chain,” Holmes said. “And we want to make sure it's out there and protect everyone to the best of our ability.”

According to lawmakers, firefighters across the country are supporting PBDE bans.

While some manufacturers are lobbying against the ban, some furniture companies like IKEA have already discontinued the use of PBDEs in their products.

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Alaska lawmakers target toxin used to fireproof electronics, furniture

by Christopher Eshleman / ceshleman@newsminer.com

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JUNEAU — Four Alaska legislators last month joined policymakers around the world in trying to eliminate a toxic chemical compound used to fireproof household electronics and furniture.

Scientists link the fire retardant to cancer and other health problems. People and animals can ingest it while eating food or breathing household dust.

Environmental groups in Alaska have unanimously asked lawmakers this year to ban companies from selling electronics and furniture that contain more than trace amounts of the chemical.

Industry and governmental leaders around the world have already targeted the chemical, polybrominated diphenyl ether, for elimination. Roughly a dozen U.S. states have already banned PBDEs, which are used in bromine-based flame retardants.

Four Democrats last month sponsored measures in the state House and Senate. Rep. Scott Kawasaki, D-Fairbanks and one of the sponsors, cited scientific study that strongly suggests the compounds can cause neurological harm, cancer and hormone and endocrine disruption. He said legislators are still digging into the science behind the issue but suggested the scientific community's call for caution merits action.

"It boils down to community health ... I think it's a step in the right direction," he said of the bill.

The measures would also direct the state Departments of Environmental Conservation and Health and Social Services to draft and update a larger list of chemicals considered toxic by other state and federal agencies. It does not call for regulation beyond PBDEs, only that the list be updated every three years.

Scientists have studied the health implications of the fire retardant since at least the 1990s. The chemical is stored and carried in body fat and moves upward through the food chain, with concentrations compounding with each step and cresting in seals and other animals near the peak. That puts subsistence hunters and fishermen at greater risk than other people, said Frank von Hippel, a University of Alaska Anchorage biologist.

Von Hippel said PBDEs are shed by electronics and household products to become part of common dust, something the measures' proponents say is particularly relevant in Alaska given the need to keep doors and windows shut for much of the year.

The bills list three specific subtypes of the chemical. Companies in the United States have generally stopped making two, but the third, called deca-PBDE, is still commonly manufactured, von Hippel said. He said they're generally banned

in Europe as well.

The chemicals carry great significance for arctic communities. Von Hippel said atmospheric currents carry PBDEs and other persistent organic pollutants toward the poles and into arctic regions through a natural atmospheric process known as the “grasshopper effect.” Cold weather then force the chemicals from their gaseous state and leave them to settle into the environment.

Greater concentrations here mean greater exposure to northern species of animals and to Alaskans, and von Hippel said it leaves Alaska on the front line in ongoing international discussion of how to regulate or eliminate the use of persistent organic pollutants, or POPs.

Von Hippel said mothers pass accumulated chemicals such as PBDEs to children during pregnancy and breast feeding. Pam Miller, with the Alaska Community Action on Toxics, cited a recent study that suggests women in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta had the highest PBDE levels of any population in the arctic.

Critics of full PBDE bans say the science behind the policy discussion falls short of justifying total prohibition, at least until substitutes are easily available. One critic is Dr. David Heimbach, a Seattle burn doctor who said he regularly saw Alaska patients over a three-decade career. He said policymakers in California voted to ban the chemical without collecting enough input from doctors first.

Heimbach said by phone Friday he’d prefer that governments phase out PBDEs instead of banning them, as Alaska’s bills would do. He said the chemical’s safety value should not be discounted.

“There’s no question they work as fire retardants,” he said.

Late last year, 145 scientists from around the world agreed to the “San Antonio Statement” outlining health hazards from exposure to bromine- and chlorine-based flame retardants. Some are already addressed in international environmental laws such as the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, but Congress is one of a handful of national legislatures or parliaments that have yet to ratify that convention. Even if Congress did adopt the treaty, it would still fall to federal and state government agencies to implement a ban.

The Alaska bills are House Bill 63 and Senate Bill 27, proposed by lead sponsors Sen. Bill Wielechowski and Rep. Lindsey Holmes, both Anchorage Democrats. They await hearings in committees focused, respectively, on commerce and health.

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