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Legislation would minimize impact of dangerous chemicals

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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