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March 8, 2018

Dear Representative Tarr and Representative Josephson, Co-Chairs; and Members of the House Resources Committee:

On behalf of the Alaska Community Action on Toxics, we thank Representative Tarr for sponsoring HB 27, High Risk Chemicals for Child Exposure. This is an important measure to protect the health of Alaskan children, firefighters, our families and communities. We look forward to the opportunity to provide testimony in the House Resources Committee hearing on March 9 and sincerely hope that the Committee will pass this bill.

HB 27 protects vulnerable Alaskans from high risk exposure to organohalogen flame retardant chemicals found in everyday products such as toys, nap mats, breast feeding pillows, and other children's products, as well as upholstered furniture. Our review of the substantial body of scientific peer-reviewed literature shows that exposure to these harmful flame retardant chemicals is associated with serious adverse health effects including neurodevelopmental harm (reduced IQ, memory impairment, learning deficits), infertility and other reproductive disorders, interference with thyroid hormone levels and other endocrine system effects, immune disorders, and cancers. HB 27 serves as a critical preventative measure in support of the health and well being of Alaskans and provides substantial savings in health care costs associated with these diseases.

People in Alaska are disproportionately exposed to persistent, bioaccumulative, and toxic flame retardant chemicals because Alaskans spend more time indoors in more insulated areas and in homes with less ventilation during the long winter. Toxic flame retardant chemicals can be released from objects such as couch foam and become attached to household dust that people can inhale or ingest. Because children play on the floor and put their hands in their mouths, they ingest these harmful flame retardants. Studies have found 2-5 times higher levels of flame retardant chemicals in toddlers than in their parents. Also, global distillation occurs when persistent chemicals such as flame retardants are transported by atmospheric and marine currents from warmer to colder regions of the Earth and remain there. The cold acts as a hemispheric sink and traps the harmful chemicals in Alaska and other Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. Alaska Community Action on Toxics coordinates community-based research in the Norton Sound region of Alaska with six universities and supported by the National Institutes of Health. We have recently published a series of papers in peer-reviewed journals which demonstrate elevated levels of flame retardant chemicals in households, traditional foods, and serum of the people of St. Lawrence Island. These levels are shown to interfere with thyroid function.

Highly toxic flame retardant chemicals are in a variety of products we use every day. However, they do not provide fire safety benefits. While chemical companies say their flame retardants make our products safer, the truth is that flame-retardants added to polyurethane foam products have been shown to be ineffective in fire protection. They generate excessive smoke and toxic chemical byproducts that expose firefighters to a toxic soup, including cancer-causing dioxins and furans.

HB 27 presents an opportunity for the Alaska State Legislature to protect the health of our citizens. Although there are no federal laws that protect people from the unnecessary addition of flame retardants to furniture and children's products, the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) issued a warning about products containing organohalogen flame retardant chemicals.

“The known adverse health effects of these chemicals to consumers include: reproductive impairment (e.g., abnormal gonadal development, reduced number of ovarian follicles, reduced sperm count, increased time to pregnancy); neurological impacts (e.g., decreased IQ in children, impaired memory, learning deficits, altered motor behavior, hyperactivity); endocrine disruption and interference with thyroid hormone action (potentially contributing to diabetes and obesity); genotoxicity; cancer; and immune disorders. These chemicals have a disproportionately negative health effect on vulnerable populations, including children.” [September 28, 2017].

At the same time that the CPSC issued this guidance, it began a rulemaking process to ban the use of the entire class of organohalogen flame retardants from 1) children's toys and child care articles, 2) mattresses and mattress pads, 3) upholstered household furniture, and 4) the outer plastic casings for electronics. Because that rulemaking will likely take years to complete, the CPSC issued a public warning to request that manufacturers of the products “eliminate the use of such chemicals in these products.” Unwilling to wait for the slow-moving federal process, sixteen states are considering policies in 2018 to ban toxic flame retardants: Alaska, Connecticut, Iowa, Indiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia. Thirteen states have already adopted 33 policies to end the use of toxic fire retardant chemicals.

The Toxic-Free Children Act (HB 27) is good for business because it helps Alaskan businesses meet the increasing consumer demand for safer products and encourages innovation and the development of safer alternatives in furniture and other products.

We urge support and passage of HB 27.

Sincerely,



Pamela Miller

Executive Director, Alaska Community on Toxics