

Action on toxic crisis

By Kenneth Geiser and Joel Tickner, Globe Columnist | June 12, 2005

TOXIC CHEMICALS are increasingly being found in the air, water, food, and products we use every day as well as in our own bodies. In 2003, the Centers for Disease Control reported that the majority of Americans carry more than 100 foreign chemicals in their body tissue. While we do not know a lot about the effects of these chemicals, evidence indicates that these exposures may be linked to a wide range of illnesses.

Many chemicals in our everyday commercial products enter our communities without any state or federal regulatory oversight. Rather than large volumes of hazardous chemicals generated by a few large industries, today we find small amounts of toxic chemicals ubiquitously distributed about our homes and workplaces.

Small amounts of lead, mercury, phthalates and other chemicals show up in dust samples in common households and small quantities of brominated flame retardants erode off of the casings of our electronic products. A study that will be presented Monday by the Boston University School of Public Health and University of Massachusetts Lowell found that polybrominated diphenyl ethers -- flame retardants used in television housings, textiles, and foam cushions -- are ending up in house dust and in the bodies of women of childbearing age in the Boston area. The levels of these chemicals, which may pose risks to child development, in American women are some 40 times the levels in women in Europe.

We do not know much about the health or environmental effects of small amounts of chemicals; indeed, while this situation is slowly changing, many of the chemicals are largely unstudied and untested. Most people believe that the chemicals they buy in everyday products, such as cleaners, adhesives, and coatings, have been tested and demonstrated to be safe by government.

The sad truth is that more than 99 percent, by volume, of the chemicals on the market today are assumed safe until proven dangerous, and the burden is on government and consumers to do so. With little information on chemicals that are widely diffused in the environment and little power for governments to act on accumulating knowledge, many of our federal and state laws are limited in assuring public health protections.

Other nations have begun to address these problematic conditions. The European Union is currently debating a broad overhaul of chemicals policies. A proposal called REACH would require manufacturers (including those exporting from the United States to Europe) to generate the needed information on chemicals and authorize governments to sharply limit the use of the most dangerous chemicals. A new United Nations treaty requires the restriction and phaseout of the manufacture and use of 12 of the worst chemicals.

We need to take these initiatives seriously. Massachusetts industry -- with about 40 percent of its exports going to Europe -- must meet the challenge of new EU chemicals regulations. Ignoring them will have significant implications for firms in the Commonwealth. Several states have moved forward, enacting legislation to curb the use of certain

dangerous chemicals, including mercury and brominated flame retardants. Proposed Massachusetts legislation would require the state to set up action plans to substitute 10 problem chemicals used in commerce with safer, feasible alternatives and establish a process for addressing additional chemicals.

These small steps are a good start but far from enough. And the states cannot do this work alone. While a public discussion on the problems of chemicals in everyday products has occurred in Europe over the past several years, such a discussion has not reached the United States. In fact, federal toxics policy is outdated and threatens to leave US firms at a serious disadvantage in an increasingly environmentally conscious marketplace.

While innovative, forward-looking efforts in Massachusetts are critical to protecting consumers and keeping the Commonwealth's businesses competitive in the global marketplace, we also need a new national initiative that ensures adequate information on chemicals and their health and ecosystem implications, restricts the most dangerous chemicals, and provides strong market signals as to what chemicals should be avoided. We need a national program that encourages and supports innovation and the development of new and safer chemicals and products.

At one time the United States was an international leader in setting chemical management policy. We need to reclaim that leadership. We need once again to create a new federal framework to more effectively manage chemicals and chemical contaminants -- only this time, not only those emitted by industry, but those that end up in everyday products.

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