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Douse plan to ban flame retardants

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Every year, flame retardants save hundreds of lives in the United States, and thousands more across the globe.

Not only do flame retardants reduce the spread of fire, they reduce the threat of ignition in the first place, and give people more time to escape injury. They are particularly important in providing added fire safety in schools, airplanes, automobiles and retirement homes. One of the most common flame retardants is decabromodiphenyl ether (Deca-BDE), which is used in flammable consumer products such as televisions, upholstered furniture and carpets.

Despite Deca-BDE's undeniable history of saving lives, the Toxic Free Legacy Coalition -- whose activist membership includes the Washington Toxics Coalition -- is asking the Legislature to ban this chemical in Washington state.

The Washington Toxics Coalition's apparent mission is to "protect public health and the environment by eliminating toxic pollution." Yet Deca-BDE -- the most common and rigorously-tested variety -- is non-toxic in its application. No country in the world has banned Deca-BDE, and there is no alternative with such a proven track record of safety and performance.

Extensive studies in both Europe and the United States show Deca-BDE is safe. Following a 10-year risk assessment -- which evaluated more than 500 studies -- the European Union concluded Deca-BDE does not pose health or environmental risks.

The active element in the most effective flame retardants, bromine, is found widely in nature and is primarily harvested from seawater, salt lakes and underground brine deposits. Bromine compounds are also used in the manufacturing of pharmaceuticals, including sedatives and antihistamines. Pharmaceuticals with bromine compounds are being tested in the fight against Alzheimer's, cancer and AIDS. Bromine compounds are also used in photography.

In the case of flame retardants, bromine compounds are added or blended into materials in solid form -- not gas form -- so the opportunity for human exposure is extremely small. As a result, where Deca-BDE levels are detected in our environment, they are measured at extremely low levels -- parts-per-billion, or parts-per-trillion.

Motivated by dollars rather than science, the campaign to ban flame retardants -- particularly Deca-BDE -- would do more harm than good. Since 2000, members of the Toxic Free Legacy Coalition have received more than $5 million from wealthy U.S. foundations. Those funds are being misdirected in the backing of efforts to ban Deca-BDE. The House of Representatives already has rejected such an effort, favoring continued study instead, and the Senate should consider the same.

As a sensible environmentalist, I believe banning flame retardants would put the most vulnerable at risk needlessly -- young children and the elderly -- when there is simply no evidence of human harm. Precaution dictates we err on the side of proven fire safety.

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