
Body toxins bill moves closer to law

Parents of Berkeley family that tested for contaminants testify

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Inside Bay Area

SACRAMENTO — California moved closer Tuesday to the establishment of the country's only statewide biomonitoring program, aimed at tracking chemicals such as plastics and flame retardants that scientists increasingly find in our bodies.

The Assembly Health Committee approved Senate Bill 600 by Sens. Don Perata, D-Oakland, and Deborah Ortiz, D-Sacramento, agreeing with its aim to sample California's population for a variety of compounds and track trends in chemical exposures. The bill heads next to the full Assembly, the first time in five tries such a program has emerged from committee.

Also on Tuesday, the committee said cosmetics manufacturers would have to submit to the state a list of any product ingredients known to cause cancer or reproductive harm. That bill, Senate Bill 484 by Sen. Carol Migden, D-San Francisco, also heads to the Assembly floor and has needed multiple reworkings to clear the committee.

Supporters called both measures an important step forward for Californians seeking to know what is in their bodies and their products.

Opponents — mostly industry but also including a coalition of breast cancer organizations — said the bills force the disclosure of information with no context or understanding. That serves only to needlessly scare people, they said.

"There is a right to know, but there is also a right to understand," testified Bob Krieger, a toxicologist with the University of California, Riverside.

Not so, said Dr. Gina Solomon, a senior scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council and an adjunct professor at University of California, San Francisco. A state biomonitoring program, she said, would serve as a "guiding light" for policy makers trying to assess the efficacy of public health decisions.

"When scientists evaluate health risks, they need three pieces of information," said Solomon, one of three people invited to testify in favor of the bill. "They need information about hazard, information about dose and information about exposure. This bill will enhance the information available on exposure."

The other two testifying Tuesday in support of SB 600 were Jeremiah Holland and Michele Hammond,

parents of the Berkeley family the Times tested for a suite of environmental contaminants.

The paper's investigation included metals, flame retardants, plasticizers and the chemical precursors of Teflon and Scotchgard. It found measurable amounts in all family members, with their two children — particularly their 2-year-old son, Rowan — surprisingly high in flame retardants.

"The true significance of our family's results is that everyone is exposed to similar mixtures of toxic chemicals," Holland said. "What do our results tell us about your families, your neighbors, your communities?"

"We are only one family of four," he added. "Our results should be an indication to everyone that there is a serious problem society must address."

Opponents insisted neither bill would address that problem.

The public, they said, would learn trace amounts of toxins are found in their bodies and products. But they would have no way to judge whether such levels are harmful or harmless.

"I'm not clear that simply reporting the presence of a chemical indicates risk," said Republican Rep. Keith Richman, a Northridge physician, who voted against both bills. "There is a significant difference between saying 'Phthalates — a class of compounds ubiquitous in cosmetics and personal care products such as shampoo — are carcinogens' and 'The long-term use of cosmetics containing (small) amounts of phthalates is a risk.'"

SB 600 would not in itself establish a biomonitoring program. Instead it creates a panel to advise state agencies on how to best conduct and create such a program, though sponsors envision a California-specific version of a nationwide program run by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In fact, the CDC has, in a letter to U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, offered to conduct \$3,000 worth of testing for up to 500 Californians annually, a value of \$1.5 million a year.

But even that might not offer much insight to California's diverse population of 35 million. "That's a whole lot of money," said Sandy Walsh, president of California Breast Cancer Organizations. "And scientists don't know how to interpret the data."

Europe has moved to ban such compounds as phthalates, which are found in many everyday products in miniscule amounts and known to be carcinogenic or reproductive toxins, and many major manufacturers have started to reformulate their products to avoid such a ban.

"We're just asking for a list," Migden said. "This cannot be seen as too rash a move."