

THE NEXT STEP

Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM



Local Toxics Disposal

■ **The next Sebastopol Toxics Collections Days are Tuesday August 9 and December 6**, from 4 to 8pm. To make an appointment, call 707/795-2025 or 877/747-1870 at least 24 hours before the event. You can also drop items at the Household Toxics Facility.

■ **For more about local toxics disposal**, see www.recyclenow.org or call 707/565-3375.

The Good, the Bad, and the TSCA

As we go to press, the U.S. Congress has passed, and the president has signed, legislation that provides the first serious update to our primary federal toxics law since its inception forty years ago (in 1976).

A wide range of environmental, labor, health, and consumer groups — even government agencies — have worked for years to reform TSCA (Toxic Substance Control Act).

So, how did our representatives do at improving protections for people, animals, and ecosystems?

The reviews so far are mixed, with both cheers and serious concerns. There's also relief that worse provisions were stopped by citizen groups who acted for our shared well-being. (At the end of this article, I have some key ways you can help ensure positive outcomes from TSCA's updates.)

The Problems With TSCA

So what were some of the key issues that folks have been trying to solve with TSCA reform?

• **TSCA makes it difficult for consumers to find the information they need** to identify safe and unsafe chemicals in their everyday lives.

• **A product's so-called "inert" ingredients can be toxic** but kept secret.

• **Manufacturers don't need to demonstrate that their products**

are safe before use. Instead, after sales start, the government has the burden to prove that they're harmful. Making that case is often challenging and time-consuming, while the damage continues on.

• **Very little is known about nearly all of the tens of thousands of chemicals produced and used in the U.S.** Plus, says the coalition group Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families (SCHF), "over the past three decades, the EPA has required testing on just 200 existing chemicals and restricted only five."

• **The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) is often quite limited in its actions.** When it tried to use TSCA to restrict asbestos in the 1980s, it was overpowered and largely stopped by industry; this has discouraged EPA action ever since.

• **The industry isn't encouraged to innovate safer materials.**

The U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee concludes, "TSCA has largely been viewed as a failure, despite its good intentions."

The result of all this is that a wide range of toxics are allowed to enter our daily lives without safety testing, labels, or our informed consent. In studies, every American tested has multiple toxics in our bodies.

Studies also show that significant numbers of people are being made ill by the toxics in our bodies and everyday lives — with extensive financial and emotional costs to individuals, their families, our communities, and our country. Wouldn't we prefer a system that makes it easier for us to protect ourselves from harm?

About the New Legislation

So how are health and environmental groups evaluating this bill?

Typical is the comment of Melanie Benesh of the Environmental Working Group (EWG). She says, "While [it] ... includes some important improvements, the bill falls short of adequately protecting Americans from exposure to hazardous chemicals."

Observers do note the accomplishment of getting any legislation through, with challenges from both industry and current D.C. politics.

The measure also does have its positives. Andy Igrejas, Director of SCHF, says, "The final bill gives EPA important new powers to require chemical testing and to take action to restrict priority chemicals."

Process improvements include requiring that the EPA determine if a new chemical is safe *before* it enters the marketplace; directing the EPA to consider vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, children, and chemical workers; making chemical safety reviews more science-based; and requiring the EPA to more quickly regulate certain chemicals. It also encourages study of potential cancer clusters and less animal testing.

However, reviewers have also noted some key negatives. First and foremost is that it reduces the states' ability to act. This is serious because, in the vacuum of federal action, states have been leading the way in creating protections from toxics.

However, prior drafts of the bill had more serious cuts to states' authority. Because of citizen action,

See **TSCA**, over



DEET-Free 4 U and Me

With summertime comes the call to be outside — maybe hanging out with friends, taking a hike, or going on a camping trip.

However, in these outdoor activities, we can find ourselves dodging gnats, swatting at mosquitoes, and ejecting hitchhiking ticks. Plus news reports can raise concerns about the risks of bug-borne illnesses.

So what can we do to block the invaders and restore peace of mind? Too often the prescribed remedy is DEET, a highly toxic bug repellent linked to serious skin, eye, and neurological problems. It's absorbed through the skin, and can cause toxic reactions even at relatively low concentrations. It can even damage synthetic fabrics and plastic, which has caused it to be banned from various sites.

All this harm is just not necessary, because there are effective less-toxic options. For instance, natural essen-

tial oils that have proven effective include eucalyptus, catnip, and neem. Buy them and mix with a carrier oil or lotion; or make a spray with witch hazel and distilled water. Or look for products that feature them. (Read product labels for proper usage, cautions, and evidence of effectiveness.) Learn more about the issues, options, and other easy preventative measures at www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol6no4.pdf.

I was also delighted recently to hear the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) finally sanction a related option, lemon eucalyptus oil, confirming that it can be as effective as DEET in repelling mosquitoes. Made from leaves of *Eucalyptus citriodora*, other folks find that it also works on gnats, ticks, and more. Its active ingredient, p-menthane 3,8-diol (PMD) is registered with the EPA. Note that some commercial PMD products are not made from *E. citriodora* oil, but rather from synthetic citronellal. I prefer natural essential oils.

A CDC fact sheet also recommends another new ingredient garnering praise, Picaridin, a derivative of compounds found in black pepper. Studies show that it performs as well as DEET, and EPA data notes that a 20% concentration is effective against mosquitoes and ticks for 8 to 14 hours. The Environmental Working Group (EWG) says that it's a good DEET alternative, although it doesn't have much long-term testing.

Consumer Reports recently tested bug repellents, and three of its top five picks don't contain DEET. Its #1 and #4 choices feature Picaridin, and its #2 choice contains lemon eucalyptus oil. Imagine that!

FOR MORE INFORMATION: www.mattermore.wordpress.com/2011/05/02/cdc-says-lemon-eucalyptus-as-effective-as-deet • www.treehugger.com/health/3-top-rated-insect-repellents-dont-contain-deet.html • www.consumerreports.org/cro/insect-repellent/buying-guide.htm • <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2015/05/25/natural-insect-repellents.aspx>

TSCA, continued

improvements were made, including grandfathering in existing state laws and giving states some ability to act on chemicals of concern.

However, the new law puts EPA action first, and gives it many years to act, thus likely delaying restrictions on harmful chemicals. Also, it doesn't require adequate funding from industry, and it's unclear if its new safety standard will give the EPA the power to restrict or ban the most dangerous chemicals.

While some community groups supported the bill, others, such as the Center for Environmental Health (CEH), felt that it was just too far short of what's needed. The CEH's Ansje Miller observes that, while there were improvements to it, "they were all improvements to a bill that, as introduced, was written by the chemical industry." Miller adds, "The public deserves better."

Igrejas of SCHF says, "The organizations in our coalition represent millions of families who are dealing with the burden of disease and disability caused by toxic chemicals.

This bill falls short of their expectations, though it should help. To get the change we need, we must all continue to press the moral urgency of reducing the harm caused by toxic chemicals at all levels."

Rhea Suh, President of the Natural Resources Defense Council, reports, "It will be some years before we know for sure how successful the bill will be at protecting the public. NRDC will press hard to ensure the strong implementation of this bill."

Ansje Miller of CEH warns, "Just as we followed every step of the legislation, we must remain vigilant through the law's implementation.... We will need you again when the EPA determines which chemicals it evaluates, issues rules about whether a chemical is safe for the market, and makes decisions about how it is going to make those determinations."

Our participation is vital in how this plays out. I encourage you to support and get action alerts from the groups who are insisting on protective implementation of TSCA. You can learn more about the specifics via the links that follow.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: www.ewg.org/enviroblog/2016/05/new-tsca-bill-falls-short-protecting-americans-toxic-chemicals • www.saferchemicals.org/get-the-facts/an-abbreviated-guide-to-the-frank-r-lautenberg-act-chemical-safety-in-the-21st-century-act • www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/06/united-states-adopts-major-chemical-safety-overhaul • www.saferchemicals.org/get-the-facts/what-is-tsca • www.ceh.org/news-events/blog/a-murky-milestone-for-childrens-health • https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toxic_Substances_Control_Act_of_1976

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program** (STEP). **STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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