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Russell Long and Joan Blades: Fire retardants and health risks

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In so many areas, California is an environmental trendsetter for the nation. But when it comes to fire retardant chemicals used in furniture and other products in our homes, the state has created a toxic legacy -- one that particularly threatens the young.

In 1975, California became the only state to develop fire safety standards for furniture, and soon after for mattresses, and it is now developing standards that will require the use of fire retardants in bedding such as pillows and comforters.

The result is that over the past 32 years, tens of millions of pounds of brominated and chlorinated fire retardants have been put into products that we have intimate contact with every day. Now, virtually every Californian tested has been found to have these fire retardants stored in their bodies, with babies showing the highest levels.

Babies are especially vulnerable because they crawl or climb on furniture and carpeting treated with fire retardants, and they also absorb these from their mothers' breast milk, which in California represents the highest levels found anywhere in the world, according to scientists.

This is especially troubling in light of recent studies that link fire retardant exposure to cancer, birth defects, autism, hyperactivity, learning disabilities such as attention deficit disorder and a host of other problems.

At the same time, fire statistics don't show that these chemicals are actually saving lives, which explains why firefighter organizations throughout the state are supporting the elimination of the brominated and chlorinated fire retardants used in furniture and bedding products.

In marked contrast to the California's national leadership on other environmental issues such as global warming or automobile smog, state regulations on fire safety have actually caused a national problem. This is because furniture makers find it uneconomical to carry two sets of inventory, so many build only California-compliant furniture regardless of where it is sold in the United States.

Clearly, the state needs to go in a new direction.

This is particularly the case given the chemical industry's history of playing games with a veritable who's who of dangerous fire retardants.

For instance, in 1978 the Environmental Protection Agency banned PCBs, a fire retardant used in electrical transformers, after 1,200 Japanese citizens were sickened by eating cooking oils tainted with them. Soon after, the EPA determined that PCBs were likely to cause cancer despite the chemical industry's contention that they were safe.

PCBs have migrated throughout the environment and into the fish we eat -- even in wild salmon -- and their structures are similar to the fire retardants in furniture today. At long last, those levels are finally declining.

Again in the 1980s, the chemical industry assured furniture and other product manufacturers that high volume fire retardants known as PBDEs were safe, but in recent years these also were banned by California and other states due to studies showing their health and toxicity dangers.

Fortunately, there is good news. A few innovative companies are already offering products that meet the state's stringent fire safety standards without using dangerous fire retardants. These manufacturers use greener chemicals or naturally fire-resistant linings such as wool. Others are moving toward smolder-resistant polyester fabrics, denser foams and internal fire-barriers to keep the polyurethane foam inside a sofa or chair from igniting in the first place.

Addressing fire safety shouldn't come at the expense of poisoning our children and our environment, especially when there are good alternatives. Shouldn't the state require these greener practices by all manufacturers?

A precedent-setting bill by Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, that would ban brominated and chlorinated fire retardants in furniture, mattresses and bedding is being heard in the Senate. Supported by professional firefighters, furniture makers, and environmental groups, this bill is a good first step toward making our homes and our children safe from toxic chemicals.