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Groups call for ban on flame retardants

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MONTPELIER -- They called themselves an unlikely coalition -- consumer advocates, firefighters and Planned Parenthood -- but their common goal is to persuade lawmakers to ban flame-retardant chemicals they consider health and environmental hazards.

Charity Carbine, environmental health advocate with the Vermont Public Interest Research Group, said several flame retardants that have been commonly used for decades in televisions, commercial furniture and mattresses have been linked to serious health hazards. A trio of polybrominated diphenyl ethers -- more commonly known as Penta, Octa and Deca -- should be banned, she said. Penta and Octa are no longer manufactured, but Deca remains in use.

"We are saying there are safer alternatives," Carbine told a gathering at the Statehouse on Tuesday.

A spokesman for the manufacturer of Deca disagrees about the availability of safe alternatives and hopes to make a case for his flame retardant next week.

"We have a product that has undergone a very thorough evaluation," said Ray Dawson, global director of product advocacy for Albemarle Corp. in Baton Rouge, La. "We question the wisdom of moving to materials about which we know less."

Matt Vinci, president of the Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont, said fire retardants are important. "Vermont needs fire safety without toxic chemicals," he said. "We don't think banning Deca is going to cause any issue for fire safety."

"These chemicals can harm reproductive health and children's development, so it's troubling that their presence in our bodies is increasing," said Elizabeth Cukor of Planned Parenthood of Northern New England.

The Senate Natural Resources Committee has begun taking testimony on a ban. Chairwoman Virginia Lyons, D-Chittenden, is lead sponsor on the bill. "This is an opportunity to remove a set of chemicals from the environment and from human exposure," she said. "We think it is critically important."

Eleven states have banned Penta and Octa. Two states -- Maine and Washington -- have Deca bans.

The Minnesota Legislature passed a Deca ban last spring, but Gov. Tim Pawlenty vetoed the bill. "Banning an effective flame retardant without assurance that safe and reasonable alternatives are in place is unwise public policy," he wrote in his veto message.

Carbine released a report she wrote that drew together research on the three flame-retardants.

"While these chemical additives have been credited with saving lives and property," she wrote, "mounting scientific evidence suggests that they are also harming the very individuals they were designed to protect."

Dawson argued that the best research, conducted for the European Union, concluded there was no

reason to restrict Deca's use.

Dawson said Deca use has declined in recent years because of "a lot of bad publicity." He said a decision about a ban needed to weigh all the risks.

"Deca is providing a tremendous contribution to fire safety," he said. "Without Deca, these plastics can be readily ignited by a candle."

The Vermont Retail Association is monitoring the legislation because retailers could get caught in the middle.

"We as retailers are very interested in safety and health issues," said Tasha Wallis, executive director. A ban, however, could leave retailers with inventories of worthless merchandise. "Should the retailers be the ones who bear the burden of the change?"

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