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Look South for Leadership to Eliminate Toxic Flame Retardants Washington State Passes Bill to Ban PBDEs

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New legislation in Washington State banning toxic PBDE fire retardants will do more to protect public health and the environment than the feeble measures proposed by the Canadian federal government.

Used as flame retardants in plastics, PBDEs (polybrominated diphenyl ethers) are a class of chemicals known to damage neurological, reproductive, immune, and hormonal systems. Recent studies have found PBDEs bioaccumulating in wildlife as a result of industrial releases and the unregulated disposal of consumer products. PBDEs are also present in household, office, and car dust and have even been detected in mothers' breast milk. Children are particularly vulnerable.

Proposed Canadian regulations, announced last December, would ban certain PBDEs but exempt the most widely used formulation – decaBDE. “Deca” is prevalent in the home: its primary uses are in hard plastic enclosures for TVs, textiles for furniture, drapery and mattresses, and electronics. Environmental groups have formally objected to the proposed regulations, on the basis that deca must be included in the ban.

In contrast, the US legislation mandates a statewide phase-out of *all* PBDEs, including deca, pending a study of alternative fire retardants by a health and safety committee. Several studies have confirmed the availability of less harmful substitutes, and some manufacturers have already voluntarily eliminated deca and other PBDEs from their products. Washington firefighters supported the ban, indicating safer alternatives should be used to protect the health of firefighters who are exposed to the toxic chemicals.

Yesterday, Washington State became the first jurisdiction in North America to take concrete steps towards banning deca. Canadians deserve equal protection against this mounting environmental hazard. Our government should follow Washington's example and prohibit all PBDEs without further delay.

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