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2018 ENVIRONMENTAL PRIORITY | SB 6396 | HB 2658

Action for Toxic-Free Food Packaging

What do non-stick pans, waterproof gear, fire-fighting foam, microwave popcorn bags, and fast food wrappers have in common? They can all contain toxic nonstick PFAS chemicals (per and polyfluoralkyl substances). PFAS chemicals repel both oil and water, but with this special chemistry comes a special problem: they are so highly persistent that scientists call them “virtually indestructible.” Their widespread usage has made them global pollutants that threaten the health of people and our environment.¹

PFAS CHEMICALS ARE CAUSE FOR CONCERN

A growing body of scientific evidence shows that these chemicals are toxic. Exposure to these chemicals is linked to kidney and testicular cancer, hormone disruption, liver toxicity, harm to the immune system, and reduced birth weight. Some chemical companies have switched to a new generation of PFAS chemicals, but these chemicals are just as concerning as the older ones.

In fact, over 200 leading scientists from around the world have called on the international community to “cooperate in limiting the production and use of PFASs and in developing safer nonfluorinated alternatives” and have urged governments to “enact legislation to require only essential uses of PFASs.”²

PFAS CHEMICALS MIGRATE FROM PACKAGING TO FOOD AND THE ENVIRONMENT

PFAS chemicals get into food when food comes in contact with PFAS treated packaging. PFAS chemicals have been found to migrate from microwave popcorn bags, sandwich wrap, muffin papers, and food wrappers. The amount of PFAS chemicals moving into food increases with heating, like in the case of microwave popcorn.^{4,5}

This is one of the 2018 Environmental Priorities presented by a coalition of over twenty organizations in Washington committed to advancing strong environmental policy.

WHAT WASHINGTON STATE CAN DO

The Healthy Food Packaging Act (HB 2658) will ban the use of PFAS chemicals in food packaging. PFAS chemicals in food packaging pose a serious problem for our health. We should not be treated as guinea pigs when safer alternatives to these toxic chemicals are available.

Washington state has the opportunity with the Healthy Food Packaging Act to protect public health and the environment by eliminating the unnecessary use of these chemicals in food packaging.

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Action for Toxic-Free Food Packaging cont'd

While the US Food and Drug Administration is tasked with regulating food contact materials, the agency's oversight is weak. While approval for a few PFASs has been withdrawn, the FDA still allows over 60 PFASs to be used in food contact materials.

PFAS chemicals pollute the environment when food packaging is landfilled or composted and spread on the ground. Researchers are detecting nonstick chemicals in compost, landfill leachate, and biosolids, which is organic material created from sewage. Because these chemicals don't break down easily, they move through the environment for many years. In Washington state, PFAS chemicals have been found in salmon, freshwater fish, osprey eggs, and in surface waters of Puget Sound, freshwater lakes and rivers. This is cause for concern as the chemicals have been associated with negative health effects to wildlife.

PFAS CHEMICALS ARE WIDESPREAD IN FOOD PACKAGING

- Recent testing by the Washington Department of Ecology found PFAS chemicals in all 30 microwave popcorn bags tested.
- In a 2016 study of 328 popular brand food packaging items - food wrappers, french fry boxes, and bakery papers - 40% tested positive for fluorinated chemicals. The packages were bought in several states, including in Western Washington.³

SAFER ALTERNATIVES ARE AVAILABLE

Companies are switching to safer alternatives. The European company Coop has developed a PFAS-free microwave popcorn bag that is currently in use. Over half of food packaging tested in the 2016 study of over 300 food packaging materials did not contain PFAS, proving alternatives are already in use.

STATES ARE TAKING THE LEAD

As PFAS chemicals continue to raise concerns across the country, several states are considering taking action on the chemicals. Currently, California and Vermont are both considering legislation on the issue of PFASs in food packaging.

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