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PRESS RELEASE

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Minnesota Bill to Ban Toxic Flame Retardants Lauded by IATP

Toxic Chemical Present in Breast Milk and Fish

Minneapolis - A bill introduced in the Minnesota legislature today would ban certain toxic flame retardants which are accumulating in the environment, in fish and even in breast milk. The bill would require phase out of three common types of PBDE flame retardants used in a variety of products. There are no manufacturers of these chemicals here in Minnesota and safe cost-effective alternatives are available.

PBDE (polybrominated diphenyl ethers) flame-retardants are used in foam products, plastics, textiles, lubricants, electrical equipment, building materials and transportation. These chemicals have accumulated in the environment, in fish and meats, in breast milk and in humans. PBDEs have been detected in fish, sediment, sewage sludge, and landfill leachates in Minnesota. Over the past 30 years, PBDE levels in the human body and in breast milk have increased by a factor of 100.

"It is alarming that levels of PBDEs in U.S. women's breast milk continue to rise. Recent studies show they are 10-100 times higher than in European women," says Kathleen Schuler, MPH, Public Health Scientist at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

PBDEs are chemically similar to PCBs, which were banned in 1976 due to their high toxicity and evidence that they can cause developmental problems in children. While PCB levels in fish and breast milk have slowly declined since being banned, PBDE levels are increasing at an exponential pace. Laboratory studies in animals indicate that PBDEs, like PCBs, are toxic to the brain and liver and disrupt thyroid function.

According to Minnesota State Senator Sandra Pappas (D), chief author in the Senate, "There is virtually no regulation of these chemicals at the federal level, that's why states are acting to protect public health. In Europe they started regulating PBDEs, and levels in Swedish women's breast milk started coming down."

California has already passed legislation to ban two types of PBDEs, penta and octa. Minnesota is one of several states introducing legislation to regulate PBDE flame retardants, along with Michigan, Maine, Maryland, Hawaii and New York. Minnesota's bill requires the phase-out of penta and octa-BDEs by 2006 and deca-BDE by 2008 in products sold and manufactured in Minnesota.

Global production of PBDEs is over 67,000 metric tons a year, but eliminating most uses of PBDE flame-retardants is possible. Great Lakes Chemical, the only U.S. manufacturer of the penta and octa-BDEs will be phasing out these formulations by 2005. Other companies are also taking action to phase-out PBDEs. For example, Ericsson, a manufacturer of cell phones and other electronics has eliminated deca-BDE from its products and has found cost-effective alternatives. Other companies like IKEA are requesting PBDE free polyurethane foam from their manufacturer.

"This bill makes protecting the health of our children a top priority. We must act, before the problem gets worse," says Rep. Jim Abeler (R), chief author in the Minnesota House.

For more information on PBDEs, go to: www.iatp.org/foodandhealth

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