

PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT : The Kitchen as Toxic Waste Dump : If commercial interests have their way, we won't hear about safer alternatives to hazardous household products.

May 30, 1995 | ROBERT GOTTLIEB | *Robert Gottlieb is co-director of the UCLA Pollution Prevention Education and Research Center and editor of "Reducing Toxics: a New Approach to Policy and Industrial Decision-Making" (Island Press, 1995). and*

We appear to be entering a period of environmental policy dismantling. This is occurring in the name of "good science" (or risk assessment), easing regulatory burdens and taking away power from the federal government and returning it to local communities. Yet, in one of the more striking ironies of this debate over environmental policy-making, there is now an effort by some California legislators to prevent local communities from undertaking local initiatives. This legislation would restrict the ability of local government to provide information to the public about hazardous household products and the availability of safer substitutes for those products. Among the most common products: oven-cleaners, paint and anything in an aerosol can.

There are multiple problems associated with household hazardous products, including little regulatory oversight despite the presence of known toxic ingredients that may be harmful to both human health and the environment. Household hazardous products that get dumped in the garbage are considered to be the most likely source of toxic wastes contaminating municipal landfills. Landfills, in turn, have ended up as Superfund sites. A recent settlement at one such site, the Operating Industries landfill in Monterey Park, stipulated that several cities that had used the landfill would be required to pay more than \$38 million for their share of Superfund liability. That figure was based exclusively on the household hazardous waste content of the municipal garbage sent to the dump.

In recognition of this disposal problem, the state Legislature in 1989 required cities to eliminate household hazardous waste from their solid waste stream. This "unfunded mandate" is extremely expensive. Most cities sought to have their residents separate their household hazardous waste products from the rest of their garbage and either bring such products to a special collection facility or have them collected through periodic "roundups."

Costs skyrocketed further when the products were in turn taken to a hazardous waste landfill or sent for incineration. One estimate by city officials calculated that disposal in this manner of a single aerosol can cost upward of \$5.

Given these kinds of costs, it has become a truism of environmental policy-making that it is far better to reduce rather than dispose of hazardous wastes. What makes this approach even more compelling is the availability of safer alternatives, such as baking soda and vinegar cleansers or non-pesticide based methods of eliminating pests or rodents. More sophisticated alternatives, such as terpene or citrus-based cleaners, are also significantly

less hazardous. Why such product substitutions have not occurred, has more to do with lack of information than lack of alternatives.

Several cities have begun to inform consumers about such alternatives and the hazards associated with many common household products. One city, Santa Monica, decided to undertake a labeling ordinance that would make information about hazardous household products and safer substitutes available in retail outlets, such as paint stores and supermarkets. The Santa Monica ordinance was fiercely opposed by the Chemical Specialty Manufacturers Assn. and grocer retail associations, although local retailers and the local Chamber of Commerce worked closely with the city to iron out concerns at the store level.

Although the chemical companies failed to stop the Santa Monica ordinance, they have now turned to a receptive state Legislature. The proposed legislation would prohibit cities from providing information on household hazardous substances or safer substitutes unless the information is "competent or reliable." The measure defines "competent" and "reliable" as requiring "scientific" testing or analysis. Thus, appropriate "good science" or risk assessment procedures (lengthy, expensive and open to court challenge) could conceivably be required to deal with vinegar, lemon juice, pumice stone or steel wool. What is undermined in this case is local initiative to deal with a crucial and costly concern.

http://articles.latimes.com/1995-05-30/local/me-7444_1_hazardous-household-products