

Toxic-Free Legacy

Eliminating Persistent Toxic Chemicals to Protect Health

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Persistent Pollution: Effects on Human Health and Wildlife

Persistent toxic chemicals, such as dioxin, mercury, and pentachlorophenol (a wood preservative), have left a toxic legacy around the globe. Once these chemicals are released into the environment, they stay around for decades, in some cases forever. They build up in the food chain and eventually make their way into our bodies, where they lodge themselves in fat and other tissues. Mothers with

persistent toxic chemicals in their bodies pass these chemicals to their children across the placenta and through breast milk.

Persistent toxic chemicals have been linked to a

wide variety of human health impacts, including effects on the nervous system, reproductive and developmental problems, cancer, and genetic damage. Children are especially vulnerable to persistent pollution because their brains and bodies are still developing when they are exposed to these toxic chemicals. Recent studies show that even low-level exposure to some persistent toxic chemicals can cause long-term behavioral and learning disabilities in children.

In addition to human impacts, persistent toxic pollution negatively affects the health of wildlife, especially aquatic species. Studies have documented persistent toxic chemicals in orcas, bald eagles, otters, salmon, rockfish, seals, crabs, seabirds, and other wildlife species.

Unfortunately, Washington state is heavily contaminated with persistent toxic chemicals

from industrial sources, as well as from consumer products.

- Seventy-four waterbodies in Washington have levels of persistent chemicals that exceed water quality standards.
- Pentachlorophenol, a chemical banned in 26 countries but still allowed for use in the United States, was found in 100% of the urban streams in King County that were tested by the U.S. Geological Survey in a recent study.
- The state has thousands of toxic sites, many of which are contaminated with persistent chemicals. Thirty-nine of these sites are contaminated with dioxin, the most toxic substance known to science.
- The Washington State Department of Health and local health departments have issued numerous fish advisories around the state urging people, especially women of childbearing age and children, to avoid or limit fish and shellfish consumption because of contamination with dioxins, mercury, and other persistent toxic chemicals.

Sources of Pollution

Major industrial sources of persistent pollution in Washington include pulp and paper mills, incinerators, and wood treatment facilities.

- There are six pulp and paper mills that use chlorine compounds for bleaching paper. These mills discharge dioxin, furans, and other chlorinated pollution into Puget Sound, Bellingham Bay, Commencement Bay, and the Columbia River.
- There are four active wood-treatment facilities in Washington that use pentachlorophenol in their operations.
- Until recently, Washington had two operating solid-waste incinerators, one in Spokane and one in Tacoma. At this time, the Tacoma incinerator is shut down due to numerous problems and efforts from WTC.



Stopping persistent toxic chemicals from entering the environment not only protects human health, but also the wildlife that inhabits the Puget Sound region.

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However, the incinerator in Spokane is still alive and running, emitting lead, mercury, cadmium, dioxins and furans, and PCBs into the environment.

- Ironically, the health care industry, the industry we count on for good health, is a

source of persistent pollution.

According to the EPA, medical waste incineration is the third leading identified source of dioxin and contributes 10% of the mercury

emissions in the environment. The use of PVC and mercury products in the healthcare industry is also a significant source.

In December 2000, the Washington State Department of Ecology established a policy to eliminate persistent pollution in the state. Washington is the first state to take such action. It is now time for Ecology to move quickly to implement actions that will eliminate persistent toxic pollution.

Alternatives

As mentioned earlier, the only way to stop persistent toxic chemicals is by eliminating the sources and processes that contribute to such pollution. This includes requiring the enforcement of current laws designed to prevent emissions of toxic chemicals, creating new laws with more stringent requirements, and shifting the demand away from products that contribute to persistent toxic pollution by themselves or through the manufacturing process.

There are readily available alternatives for most products that contain persistent chemicals. For example, digital thermometers are available in most drug stores and are cost competitive with mercury thermometers. Recycled chlorine-free paper is available to replace virgin, chlorine-bleached

office paper, toilet paper, paper towels and other paper products. Eliminating chlorine compounds in pulp and paper production eliminates dioxin and other highly toxic chlorine compounds. In addition, there are wood products available that have not been treated with pentachlorophenol or other persistent toxic chemicals.

What WTC Is Doing

The Washington Toxics Coalition is working to eliminate persistent toxic pollution on the national, state, and local levels.

- On a national level, we participate in coalitions to advance and create policies that if implemented will result in the reduction and elimination of persistent toxic chemicals.

- WTC and our local Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition partners are working to phase out toxic flame retardants (PBDEs) found in electronics, textiles, and furniture.

- In Seattle, we are working with the City to implement a first-in-the-nation purchasing resolution that will phase out City purchases of toxic products including PVC building materials and office supplies, and chlorine-bleached paper. We would like to work with other cities and counties to pass and implement similar resolutions.

What YOU Can Do

- Choose alternatives to products associated with persistent toxic chemicals and other pollutants and encourage them at schools, places of worship, your workplace, etc. The Washington Toxics Coalition has extensive information on alternatives. Call our hotline at 800-844-SAFE ext. 7 (or from within Seattle dial 632-1545 ext. 7). We also have extensive information on alternatives for the home and garden on our website at www.watoxics.org.

- Support local efforts to eliminate persistent pollution by urging city officials to adopt ordinances and resolutions to phase out these toxic chemicals.

- Call Washington Toxics Coalition at 206-632-1545 to plug into our latest campaign activities.



Four wood-treatment facilities in Washington use highly toxic pentachlorophenol to make wood utility poles resistant to rotting.