

## The Phthalate Controversy

### An Editorial

On February 10, 2009, many countries, including the USA, put in effect a ban of a type of chemical generally known as phthalates.<sup>1</sup> The United States Consumer Products Safety Commission effectively constructed the law known as the Consumer Products Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA), which bans certain types of phthalates. The law applies to specific types of products. Due to the lack of adequate scientific data and an unblemished history of the compound, controversy has developed over the legitimacy of the law. Manufacturers of the phthalates and products containing the chemicals must now absorb unnecessary burdens to comply. Consumer demand was the driving force behind this action. Are consumers more informed than the scientific communities?

According to the American Chemical Council (ACC), phthalates are among the most thoroughly studied families of compounds in the world. In over 50 years of use, not only have industries researched this chemical, but also governments, independent labs, and universities. After 50 years, the chemical holds a strong safety record. Despite all this, a challenge arose as to possible negative health effects on humans. There is no reliable evidence that any phthalate has ever caused a health problem for a human from its intended use.<sup>2</sup>

The Phthalates Esters Panel, in existence for over 30 years, is commissioned to guide research of the chemicals and its effects on the environment and health. Funded by the member companies, it has spent millions of dollars using top experts and cutting-edge research in various studies. In a general conclusion of all the studies, effects to humans are considered negligible. Still, with no scientific data showing phthalates cause any harm to humans, consumer groups and politicians

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<sup>1</sup> What Are Phthalates, an editorial, <http://www.sinclair-rush.com/environment.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.americanchemistry.com/s\\_phthalate/sec.asp?CID=1759&DID=6476](http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_phthalate/sec.asp?CID=1759&DID=6476)

have stirred enough commotion to draw attention to the studies performed on rodents and primates.

Phthalates have been found to cause reproductive issues in lab rats at dosing levels thousands of times higher than any exposure a human will encounter. Rats metabolize many things differently than humans do and phthalates appear to be one of those substances. Humans do not absorb phthalates as readily as rodents and phthalates break down more quickly in humans. Studies involving primates indicate no harm existed in the reproductive systems when given large doses of phthalates from the weaning period through sexual maturity.

Ironically, given all the extensive research results, on August 14, 2008, President Bush signed the CPSIA into law. The purpose of Public Law 110–314 is “To establish consumer product safety standards and other safety requirements for children’s products and to reauthorize and modernize the Consumer Product Safety Commission”.<sup>3</sup>

As noted, the law applies only to children’s products. In a world of thousands of plastic products, why does this law address only one category? It all started in 2007 with the discovery of harmful materials in toys manufactured in China. Consumers flock to hear the news reports and react, demanding immediate attention. They put pressure on the politicians and, well, an election year was approaching.

Paradox sums it up. The scientific research is clear, yet when public perception forms an alternate opinion, controversy follows. Now, even after the millions of dollars spent on research, significant resources of manufacturers will be required to modify their products. It’s everyone’s guess who will pay that bill.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cpsc.gov/ABOUT/Cpsia/legislation.html> - click on the CPSIA PDF link.