



July 26, 2012

MERI Insider

breaking news for friends of MERI

Protecting Ocean Life
and Human Health
through Research,
Education and Advocacy

Dear Friends,



In the *May Insider*, we brought you the breaking news of the *Chicago Tribune's* investigation of the flame retardant industry scandal. Now we can report that this exposé has had important political repercussions. Two years after Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) first introduced the Safe Chemicals Act, it has now passed out of committee and is finally heading for a vote on the floor of the U.S. Senate. During the hearing, our new study of toxic exposure in California firefighters was cited as supportive evidence

for the bill (see below). The committee's support for the Safe Chemicals Act is a vote for the health of all Americans, and we are proud to have played a role.

I want to thank you again for your commitment and active engagement in MERI's work. I hope you can see in this *Insider* that your support is having a significant impact and gaining the needed momentum to protect our ocean planet and human health.

“The Senate committee’s passage of the Safe Chemicals Act yesterday was a vote for the health of all Americans.”

– MERI Director Dr. Susan Shaw

Senate Committee Approves Tougher Chemical Reporting Bill

Yesterday, the **Senate Environment and Public Works (EPW) Committee**, chaired by Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), approved the Safe Chemicals Act (S. 847), designed to reform the antiquated Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) of 1976. It gives the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) the tools necessary to require health and safety testing of toxic chemicals and places the burden on industry to prove that chemicals are safe.

“This vote is a major milestone in our effort to fix America’s broken system for regulating toxic chemicals,” said Senator Lautenberg, the bill’s sponsor.

Under current TSCA regulations, the EPA can call for safety testing only after evidence surfaces demonstrating a chemical is dangerous. As a result there are over 80,000 chemicals currently sold in commerce that have never been tested for their impact on human health or the environment. In the past 35 years, the EPA has been able to require testing for just 200 of them and to ban only five dangerous substances. Americans have been treated like human guinea pigs.

“For too long, the chemical industry has deceived the public and the government about the safety of their products. They have ripped a page out of the tobacco industry’s playbook. Today we are saying ‘game over’ – it’s time to protect the public health,” said Senator Lautenberg.

Dr. Susan Shaw's New Study Cited in Testimony

During the [oversight hearing](#) for the bill, a new study documenting toxic exposure in California firefighters was presented in supporting testimony by Tony Stefani, President/Founder of the San Francisco Firefighters Cancer Prevention Foundation. Stefani, a former firefighter and cancer survivor who is a co-author on the study, previously presented the study's preliminary results to the California State Assembly oversight hearings on "California's Furniture Flammability Standard and the Safety of Flame Retardant Chemicals," including risks to firefighters. Visit the MERI website to read [Tony Stefani's testimony](#) or [view a video](#).

The study's lead scientist **Dr. Susan Shaw** stated, "Our findings show that firefighters have high levels of flame retardants and cancer-causing chemicals in their blood produced during fires. They are also at high risk for several cancers, which underscores the need for regulations to protect not only firefighters but all Americans from exposure to toxic, carcinogenic chemicals in everyday consumer products."

Susan will be on Capitol Hill in early August to meet with key legislative staff of Senator Frank Lautenberg, sponsor of S.847, and others connected to the EPW Committee.



Tony Stefani, President/Founder, San Francisco Firefighters Cancer Prevention Foundation

Shaw et al., Persistent Organic Pollutants including Brominated and Chlorinated Dioxins and Furans in Firefighters from Northern California

This groundbreaking study, to be published this fall, provides new evidence that brominated flame retardants in burning household materials endanger the health of U.S. firefighters. It is the first study to measure brominated dioxins and furans in firefighters' blood and shows for the first time that exposure to these chemicals during fires may carry even higher risks for cancer and other health problems than already demonstrated.

Dr. Shaw stated, "Our study provides clear evidence that firefighters are exposed to high levels of cancer-causing chemicals including brominated flame retardants and their combustion by-products – dioxins and furans – that are formed during fires by the burning of flame-retarded foam furniture, televisions, computers and building materials. Firefighters have much higher levels and different patterns of these chemicals in their blood than the general population. There is no doubt that firefighting is a dangerous occupation. What we have shown here points to the possible link between firefighting and cancer."

This was a small pilot study of 12 San Francisco firefighters. In light of the results, there is now a case to be made for conducting larger studies on both women and men firefighters and in different U.S. locations.

"There is no doubt that firefighting is a dangerous occupation; what we have shown here points to the possible link between firefighting and cancer."

– Dr. Susan Shaw

New Polls Show Public Support for Chemical Reform

Recent polling indicates that public opinion across the nation is in favor of toxics reform but new battles lie ahead. The Safe Chemicals bill must now come up for voting in both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. It is widely believed that bipartisan support will be essential to its passage.

Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME) has expressed her full support in a July 20 letter to the Senate committee stating:

"The fact is that all parties, including the chemical industry, understand that a law enacted in 1976 cannot effectively regulate our modern chemical industry and that reforms must be made to ensure the safety and confidence of the millions of Americans who use these products. I am ready to join you in finally modernizing the TSCA."

We urge you to let your senators and representatives on both sides of the aisle know that you fully support this legislation to protect your health.

Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning (ASP) in Schoodic Waters

This is the time of the year when we bring attention to shellfish advisories from the Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR). The DMR is currently on the alert for Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning (ASP) and recently detected it in waters off the Schoodic Peninsula, which is close to Blue Hill Bay. The ASP organism is a phytoplankton called *Pseudo-nitzschia* spp. that produces a toxin called domoic acid. When domoic acid in sampled mussels reaches unacceptable levels, the DMR closes shellfish beds in the area. This has not yet occurred in Schoodic, but it's a good idea for the time being to call the DMR's shellfish sanitation hotline at (800) 232-4733 before you harvest your own mussels.

The initial symptoms of ASP include gastrointestinal disorders like vomiting, cramps, nausea and diarrhea. They generally appear in the first 24 hours and can be serious. In severe cases, symptoms can be neurological, including dizziness, headache, seizures, respiratory distress and coma. In 1987, four victims died after consuming toxic mussels from Prince Edward Island, Canada.

In the Gulf of Maine, *Pseudo-nitzschia* spp. is one of three toxic phytoplankton species of concern that MERI routinely monitors as part of its Blue Hill Bay Coastal Monitoring Program, May through October. We participate in the DMR's coast-wide Phytoplankton Monitoring Network, which serves as an early warning system for Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) along the coast of Maine. The DMR relies on our data to help identify HABs and determine where to test shellfish for toxic organisms. This week, the DMR asked MERI to monitor closely for ASP in mid-coast Maine since there is the possibility it could spread from the Schoodic area.

If the DMR closes any local shellfish beds, we will be sure to let you know. Meanwhile enjoy your picnics and cookouts on the back deck!

Are you interested in supporting MERI's work?

Please consider contributing to our work to stop toxic ocean pollution by [making a donation](#). Visit us online at www.meriresearch.org.

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