

Ben O'Brien, President, Professional Firefighters of Vermont

Testimony in support of S.239, an Act Relating to Regulating Toxic Substances

January 30, 2014

Good Morning, my name is Ben O'Brien and I am the President of the Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont and have worked for the Burlington Fire Dept. for 15 years. I would like to thank the committee for taking the time to discuss S.239, important legislation that will protect citizens in Vermont and my member fire fighters across the state.

This legislation is about the health and safety of the citizens of Vermont and my members. Our mission as fire fighters is to protect the people that we serve and the men and women who to respond to your emergencies every day across Vermont. In 2009 and 2013, the Legislature banned harmful flame-retardant chemicals, and we are asking the legislature to again stand with us in identifying and removing toxic chemicals from consumer products in Vermont.

Let me take a few minutes to discuss our serious concerns with toxic chemicals being used in consumer products.

Many substances are toxic when they burn, but we know that certain chemicals - like the flame retardants we've discussed in the past - produce particularly harmful gases when ignited, and can make fighting fires even more dangerous.

Firefighters are exposed to chemicals via inhalation or a transdermal route. Although fire fighters use PPE (such as SCBA and protective clothing) to reduce exposure, PPE is considered the lowest level of protection in the hierarchy of controls. The best way to protect a population from exposure is to eliminate the exposure or substitute the hazardous chemical with a safer alternative.

Flame retardants are a great example of why a program to systematically look at harmful chemicals could deal with this public health problem in a better, more efficient way. Back in 2009 the legislature had to work very hard to restrict the toxic flame retardant Deca. Then in 2013, we realized a carcinogen, chlorinated Tris, was being used in its place, and we were back again asking for a restriction on that toxicant. The legislature had to again spend a lot of time and effort in restricting that harmful chemical. With the program that S.239 will set up, our scientific experts at the Department of Health could look at flame retardants more systematically, and could address this problem in a more thoughtful way.

Additionally, our experience with flame retardant chemicals gave us a firsthand look at the dirty tactics of the chemical industry in fighting to keep using toxic and

unnecessary chemicals in our consumer products. The chemical companies producing flame retardants went so far as to set up fake citizen front groups, set up misleading robo-calls to Vermonters, and sent letters to Vermont fire fighters presenting themselves as fellow firefighters, when in fact they were an out-of-state PR firm. We don't want these types of tactics to derail this important public health effort here in Vermont. This bill is a reasonable step to shed more light on the worst chemicals, and to set up a process to start moving to safer chemicals when they're available.

My members go to work every day and understand the inherent risks that we face as fire fighters, EMTs and paramedics. However, we have drawn a line in the sand by saying no to harmful and unnecessary chemicals in consumer products. We see far too many Fire Fighters leaving the profession with occupational illnesses. It is time to lead on this issue and remove these harmful chemicals from Vermont.

On a personal note, I'm a father to young child, and don't want my family unnecessarily exposed to harmful chemicals in consumer products. This bill simply sets up a program to identify the most harmful chemicals, give Vermonters more information on which products contain these chemicals, and when safer alternatives are available, phasing toxic chemicals out of use.

Again, thank you to our legislative leaders for standing with Fire Fighters, Children and Vermont by supporting S.239.