

Columnists

Originally published January 13, 2012 at 6:03 PM | Page modified January 14, 2012 at 11:31 AM

Raising a stink about the contents of fragrances

Fragrances evoke emotions and bring back memories, and we all have our favorites. But when they come in a bottle or a box, the reality is not so romantic. More than 3,000 different chemicals are used to create fragrances in cosmetics, household cleaners and other consumer products.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Fragrances evoke emotions and bring back memories, and we all have our favorites. But when they come in a bottle or a box, the reality is not so romantic.

More than 3,000 different chemicals are used to create fragrances in cosmetics, household cleaners and other consumer products. The fragrance in a single product may contain dozens of chemicals. Yet manufacturers are not required to disclose any information about the chemicals in fragrances, and most don't. Many public-health experts and environmental advocates say that stinks.

Q: Do we really need to be concerned about fragrances?

A: Yes. At least 2 percent of Americans have allergies or allergic-like reactions to fragrances, including skin rashes, headaches, throat irritation and more serious reactions. Chemicals in fragrances have also been linked to major health problems including cancer and birth defects.

If consumers have worries about specific chemicals but don't know which products contain those chemicals, they can't easily avoid those products.

Q: Why have we been hearing more lately about problems with fragrances?

A: National nonprofit organizations including the Breast Cancer Fund, Environmental Working Group and Women's Voices for the Earth have become increasingly vocal on this issue, conducting extensive research and enlisting the support of elected officials.

Several bills were introduced in the U.S. Congress in 2011 that would require more ingredient disclosure and regulation for fragrances and other chemicals in consumer products. These bills include the Safe Chemicals Act, Safe Cosmetics Act and Cleaning Product Right to Know Act.

They would replace or update decades-old federal laws that largely allow affected companies to regulate themselves through industry organizations.

Q: What are some of the changes sought by environmental and health groups?

A: Proposed changes in regulations affecting fragrances in consumer products include:

- All chemical ingredients in personal-care products and household-cleaning products would be listed on the label, including fragrances and contaminants.

- Ingredients linked to cancer and birth defects would be phased out of consumer products.
- Federal support would be provided to help the chemical industry find safer alternatives to toxic ingredients and to help small businesses meet the new regulations.

Q: What's industry's position?

A: Concerned about the costs of complying with proposed new regulations, many cosmetics, consumer products and fragrance companies have joined forces to stop them. Industry officials describe pro-regulation efforts as a "demand for radical transparency."

Besides their big-bucks lobbying effort against the regulatory movement, industry groups have created organizations and websites that may confuse the public.

For example, a new industry-funded organization that opposes many of the proposed regulations, the Safe Cosmetics Alliance (safecosmeticsalliance.org), chose a name very similar to the pro-regulation, nonprofit coalition the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics (safecosmetics.org).

The industry case against proposed regulations includes these claims:

- Undisclosed chemicals linked to medical problems are only found in products in minuscule amounts that do not cause harm to most humans or the environment.
- Many manufacturers have recently increased their scrutiny of chemicals and their ingredient disclosure, and those voluntary actions are working well to protect public health.
- Public disclosure of specific chemicals used in fragrances would put some companies at a competitive disadvantage.

Q: The two sides, consumer advocates and industry, seem so polarized. Are there any solutions both sides could live with?

A: In the current political climate, probably the only change that pro-regulation forces can expect to achieve is a watered-down version of existing European regulations, increasing the disclosure requirements for selected chemicals present in a product above a threshold amount. Even this might take years to accomplish.

Q: Would that really serve the public's interest?

A: Consumers will be the ultimate judge. In the meantime, it's your choice whether or not to buy a product that doesn't list the ingredients in its fragrance. And if you have an opinion on chemical regulation, be sure to let government officials and consumer-products companies know. That's the smell of democracy.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services.

Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com