

San Francisco board passes cell phone emission law (Update)

June 22 2010, By TREVOR HUNNICUTT , Associated Press Writer



Two people talk on their cell phones while sitting along Market Street in San Francisco, Tuesday, June 22, 2010. With San Francisco poised to adopt the nation's first law requiring disclosure of cell phone radiation levels, consumers are left to wonder whether their favorite phones could cause damage to their health. And the industry worries that the law could steer customers away from buying some of the most popular phones, because they have higher radiation levels. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

(AP) -- In this city known for producing laws both path-breaking and contentious, legislators have forcefully stepped into another debate - this time over the potential danger of cell phone use.

With the Board of Supervisors' 10-1 vote in favor of an ordinance

Mayor Gavin Newsom has indicated he will sign, San Francisco has waded into the as-yet unresolved debate over the relationship between long-term use of cell phones and health problems such as brain tumors.

It would be the country's first law requiring cell phone retailers to disclose the phones' specific absorption rate, or SAR, to customers.

SAR measures the maximum amount of radiation absorbed by a person using a handset. The Federal Communications Commission limits SAR to an average of 1.6 watts per kilogram of body tissue, but information about radiation levels is not usually readily available when people purchase phones at stores.

"From our perspective, this is a very reasonable and quite modest measure that will provide greater transparency and information to consumers for whom this is an area of interest or concern," said Newsom spokesman Tony Winnicker, who noted that the mayor is an iPhone user. "We're playing a role that we've often played, which is to be at the forefront of a debate."

The city has produced reams of novel legislation and other regulations, banning plastic grocery bags, ending municipal use of bottled water, making composting mandatory, and requiring the posting of nutrition information in restaurants.

Still after a number of scientific inquiries into this issue, no conclusions have been reached.

A major U.N. study released last month, for instance, found no clear link between cell phones and the risk of developing brain cancer.

Industry representatives see that as a reason to oppose a law like this.

"They're just responding to unfounded concern," said John Walls, a spokesman for industry trade group CTIA-The Wireless Association. He said the law "could very likely confuse and mislead consumers."

But advocates said they see the ordinance primarily as an effort to inform consumers.

Renee Sharp, the California director of the Washington-based Environmental Working Group, also said she hoped the law would dissuade consumers from buying relatively high radiation phones until their effect on the human body is fully understood. The advocacy group provided reports and other counsel to the city's Department of the Environment as they developed the policy.

"We're also hoping it will spur greater debate about whether the current federal standards are adequate or not," Sharp said. "We certainly don't think that people are not going to buy cell phones because of radiation."

Industry officials would not speculate on the impact to their business, but many of the nation's most popular cell phones have relatively high SAR levels.

This is because many of those popular phones are smart phones, which have Wi-Fi and Bluetooth receivers, as well as basic cellular capability, that add to their total SAR rating, according to Walls.

Under the law, larger chains will have to place SAR notices starting in February, while other stores will have until 2012.

While the supervisors were largely unanimous, reaction outside of City Hall and across the country was mixed.

"This is a response to public fear, not actual evidence of a risk," said

David Ropeik, a Harvard University instructor who studies risk perception. "That's all precaution based on suggestions of risk that come as much from our innate alarm bells as from conclusive evidence. And precaution argues, 'Don't wait until the evidence is conclusive,' which is a fine idea except sometimes there's no smoke underneath the fire."

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