Massachusetts governor signs law phasing out toxic PFAS in firefighters' gear

August 16 2024, by STEVE LeBLANC

Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey signs into law a bill that would phase out the use of PFAS, a group of toxic industrial compounds, in firefighters' protective gear, at the Massachusetts Statehouse, Thursday, Aug. 15, 2024, in Boston. The chemical, associated with health problems including several types of cancer, is used in gear to repel water and other substances when fighting a fire. Credit: AP Photo/Steve LeBlanc
Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey signed into law Thursday a bill that would phase out the use of PFAS, a group of toxic industrial compounds, in firefighters' protective gear.

The chemicals—associated with health problems including several types of cancer, such as breast, kidney and testicular cancer—are used in gear to repel water and other substances when fighting a fire. Connecticut is the only other state with a similar law regarding firefighters' protective gear.

"It's one thing to run into a fire, you can see the blaze and feel the heat," Healey said moments before signing the bill at the statehouse. But it's another thing, she said, to face the threat of "forever chemicals"—a silent killer that has been threatening the health of firefighters and other for years.

"These dangerous, dangerous chemicals. They're in too much of our stuff, but certainly we know they've been in protective gear. The devastating impacts are so clear," she said. "Today Massachusetts is putting the health and safety of our firefighters first."

Starting January 2025, under the new law, manufacturers and sellers of personal protective equipment containing PFAS, or perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, will be required to provide written notice to the purchaser at the time of sale that firefighting equipment contains PFAS chemicals. They're also mandated to provide a reason for why the equipment contains PFAS.

Beginning in 2027, manufacturers and sellers of personal protective equipment for firefighters will be prohibited from knowingly selling gear containing "intentionally-added PFAS" chemicals—referring to
PFAS chemicals or products that break down into PFAS chemicals that are added to the product during manufacturing.

The multilayered coats and pants worn by firefighters have become the latest battleground over PFAS, which are found in everything from food packaging to clothing. In 2023, the Environmental Protection Agency for the first time proposed limits on the chemicals in drinking water.

Richard MacKinnon, president of the Professional Fire Fighters of Massachusetts, said the new law will help curb occupational cancer.

"This is the strongest language in our nation," he said of the new state law. "This next generation of firefighters—their lives will be saved."

The International Association of Fire Fighters or IAFF has said that cancer has replaced heart disease as the biggest cause of line-of-duty deaths. Firefighters have been shown to be at higher risk than the general population of getting several types of cancer.

The state needs to see the new law as a first step in an longer-term effort to limit widespread exposure to the chemicals, activists said.

"We have more to do to protect workers and the public from direct contact with PFAS. Next, we need to address everyday products like clothing and furniture. We all deserve toxic-free homes and cancer-free lives," said Clint Richmond, conservation chair of the Massachusetts Sierra Club.

Advocates pointed to a bill left unfinished in the Legislature's formal session that would have banned PFAS in food packaging, children's products, personal care products, carpets, furniture textiles, clothing and cookware.
The bill would have also banned industrial discharges of PFAS to water sources, and set up a fund to help test and treat private wells and public water system.

Other states have also passed laws targeting PFAS.

Besides banning the chemicals in firefighters' protective gear, Connecticut has also passed legislation prohibiting the chemicals in children's products, and in clothing and apparel, cookware, cosmetics and personal care products, fabric treatments, textiles and upholstered furniture, and ski wax.

Vermont lawmakers have voted to ban the use of the chemical in personal care products, menstrual and incontinence products, apparel, cookware, artificial turf and children's products.

And Colorado added most outdoor apparel, cookware, dental floss, ski wax, menstruation products and artificial turf to the state's no-PFAS list.

In June a class action complaint was filed against makers and sellers of the chemicals and the protective gear on behalf of thousands of Connecticut firefighters exposed to PFAS chemicals contained in their protective gear.

© 2024 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Massachusetts governor signs law phasing out toxic PFAS in firefighters' gear (2024, August 16) retrieved 17 August 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2024-08-massachusetts-governor-law-phasing-toxic.html