

TRENDEVENTS NOVEMBER 2006

U.S. Rules Allow the Sale of Chemical-laden products banned by other nations to be sold in the U.S. LA Times, Marla Cone 08 Oct 06 http://www.grist.org/cgi-bin/forward.pl?forward_id=7819

As the European Union and other nations have tightened their environmental standards, mostly in the last two years, manufacturers - here and around the world - are selling goods to American consumers that fail to meet other nations' stringent laws for toxic chemicals.

To protect their citizens from dangerous chemicals, the European Union, Japan, and other nations have tightened their environmental standards for hundreds of manufactured products in recent years. Meanwhile, the U.S. EPA hasn't restricted any industrial compounds since an unsuccessful attempt to ban asbestos 18 years ago, and Americans continue to be sold products that wouldn't pass muster in many other parts of the world -- wood, toys, electronics, and cosmetics containing chemicals that raise the risk of cancer, disrupt hormonal systems, or cause reproductive or neurological damage. Michael Wilson, a professor of occupational and environmental health, says the U.S. has become a "dumping ground" for goods unwanted elsewhere. Take plywood, for example. Last year, China exported more than half a billion dollars worth of hardwood plywood to the U.S., enough to build cabinets for 2 million kitchens; most of it was so heavily tainted with formaldehyde that it couldn't even legally be sold in China, let alone in Europe or Japan.

As the European Union and other nations have tightened their environmental standards, mostly in the last two years, manufacturers - here and around the world - are selling goods to American consumers that fail to meet other nations' stringent laws for toxic chemicals.

Wood, toys, electronics, pesticides and cosmetics are among U.S. products that contain substances that are banned or restricted elsewhere because they may raise the risk of cancer, alter hormones or cause reproductive or neurological damage.

Michael Wilson, a professor at UC Berkeley's Center for Occupational and Environmental Health, said the United States is becoming a "dumping ground" for consumer goods that are unwanted and illegal in much of the world.

In the absence of U.S. regulations, some international corporations, including Hewlett-Packard, Dell, Mattel, Revlon and Orly International, have declared that all their products, no matter where they are made or sold, will comply with EU standards, the most stringent chemical laws in the world.

"We don't operate to different standards in different parts of the globe, regardless of differing environmental standards," said John Frey, manager at Palo Alto-based Hewlett-Packard.

But many U.S. and foreign companies do.

Some toys, nail polishes and other beauty products are made with plastic softeners and solvents called phthalates that the EU has banned as reproductive toxins. Several of U.S. agriculture's most popular herbicides and insecticides, including atrazine, endosulfan and aldicarb, are illegal or restricted to emergency uses in other countries. And a few electronic items, including Palm's Treo 650 smart phone and Apple's iSight camera, were pulled off shelves in Europe this summer because of lead components but are still sold here.

The EPA hasn't eliminated any industrial compounds since it sought unsuccessfully to ban asbestos 18 years ago. Unlike EU policies, U.S. law requires the EPA to prove a toxic substance "presents an unreasonable risk of injury to health or the environment," consider the costs of restricting its use and choose "the least burdensome" approach to regulate industry.

"The dumping problem is concentrated in a few product sectors. But these sectors happen to be really ubiquitous in the everyday lives of Americans. Chemical risks are being spread all over the country in ways that are invisible to consumers," said Alastair Iles, an international chemical policy expert who was a research fellow at UC Berkeley and still works with faculty there on consumer issues.

Last year alone, China exported to the United States more than half a billion dollars' worth of hardwood plywood - enough to build cabinets for 2 million kitchens, a six fold increase since 2002. Though China sends low-formaldehyde timber to Japan and Europe, Americans are getting wood that emits substantially higher levels of the chemical.

One birch plank from China, bought at a Home Depot store in Portland, gave off 100 times more formaldehyde than legal in Japan and 30 times more than allowed in Europe and China, according to July tests conducted by a lab hired by an Oregon-based wood products manufacturer. Formaldehyde exposure has been shown in human studies to cause nose and throat cancer and possibly leukemia, as well as allergic reactions, asthma attacks, headaches and sore throats. With no government standards, monitoring or labeling, U.S. consumers cannot easily identify chemical-free products.

"I'll guarantee you that no one tells a customer building a \$75,000 kitchen that their cabinets contain plywood from China that will off-gas formaldehyde," said Larry Percivalle of Oakland-based EarthSource Forest Products, a distributor that sells low-formaldehyde and sustainably grown wood.

In the wood industry, even though low-cost, chemical-free substitutes are available, much of the plywood, fiberboard and particleboard sold in the United States is manufactured with adhesives, or glues, that contain formaldehyde, said Michael Wolfe, a wood products consultant in Emeryville, Calif. The only formaldehyde standard for wood in the U.S. is one that applies just to subsidized, low-income housing. U.S. companies voluntarily meet it for all products, though it allows 10 times more formaldehyde than Japan's standards.

California may step in. The Air Resources Board is considering standards roughly equivalent to Europe's for 2008 and Japan's for 2010 through 2012. The air board estimates that one of every 10,000 Californians is at risk of contracting cancer from breathing average formaldehyde levels found in homes and offices. "We have a problem that needs to be addressed, we have technology to do it, and there is no requirement for it to happen. Nationally, no one is stepping forward, so we think this is an area where we can," said Mike Scheible, the air board's deputy executive officer.

Columbia Forest Products, which spent \$8 million to switch all its factories to nontoxic glues made of soy flour, says it is being hurt by the lack of U.S. standards for wood. "While I believe in free trade, I also believe that everybody ought to be held to the same standard," said Harry Demorest, the Portland-based company's president and chief executive. "It's particularly galling and frustrating in the Chinese case, when they're taking our market with products that have high formaldehyde content when we know full well that they can produce it with lower formaldehyde." Despite its capital investment, Columbia, which is North America's largest producer of hardwood plywood and veneer, has not raised its prices to compensate because the soy glues are as inexpensive as formaldehyde glues, Demorest said.

The state air board estimates that switching to formaldehyde-free glues like those required in Japan would increase the price of a sheet of particleboard from today's \$7 to about \$9 in 2010. California's proposal is opposed by nearly all wood producers, who say it could drive them out of business if they are forced to do what Columbia did. "The entire industry is not ready to make this change. Today we could not be competitive by changing resins," said Darrell Keeling, a general manager at Roseburg Forest Products in Oregon.

Keeling said his company makes some low-formaldehyde products but most customers aren't interested because they cost more. "Even though people talk green and think green, they won't demonstrate their commitment to it with their wallet," he said. "More regulation and more bureaucracy is not the best way to drive change."

But selling products with risky chemicals to Americans while removing them for consumers elsewhere is shortsighted, said Robert Donkers, the European Commission's Environmental Counselor in Washington, D.C.

"If companies decide to wait and see rather than innovate, they will lose the market," he said. "American consumers follow closely what is happening in other parts of the world. So they can say, 'Hey, you make them in Europe, why don't you sell them to us?'"

Air America's ABC Blacklist: The Real Story , November 3, 2006 by CommonDreams.org
by Josh Silver and Robert W. McChesney

This week we learned that some 90 major corporations demanded that their ads be pulled from radio stations that run Air America programming, demonstrating the fundamental challenge facing everyone working to promote critical journalism and a vibrant free press.

First off, let's clarify why this is taking place: The crime isn't that Air America is partisan. All or most of these firms advertise on politically conservative talk radio programs and/or stations. And the crime isn't even being "liberal." Some of these advertisers have moderate or liberal executives who donate to Democratic candidates and are far from rabid conservatives... So what is the problem? While "liberal" Air America clearly favors big D Democrats, unlike virtually all other programming on commercial radio and television, it gives airtime to reports that are critical of corporations and the powerful politicians they keep in Washington.

This is the heart of the problem: Air America commits a crime called journalism. Almost none of the so-called conservative radio shows or networks do any semblance of actual reporting. They merely pontificate -- repeating talking points that seem to be emailed straight from Karl Rove's laptop. Air America does its share of pontificating as well, and we leave it to others to compare its integrity to that of Limbaugh and Hannity. But we can say that Air America journalism occasionally focuses on corporate malfeasance. It examines closely the deeply corrupt relationship between corporate power and government officials.

This brand of journalism is found almost nowhere else on the commercial dial. It is brandished as "liberal" because it does not practice journalism as stenography to those in power. This is the same reason that Bill Moyers doesn't have any of these 90 firms lining up to underwrite his PBS reporting. So what should we learn from this episode?

1) Commercial media are highly concentrated and corporate advertisers have massive budgets, giving their programming decisions profound implications. According to its own Web site, ABC Radio has more than 4,400 affiliate radio stations reaching nearly 105 million people nationwide. Monopoly media power translates into significant political power and that is dangerous. This is a big deal.

2) Media are concentrated in the hands of massive corporations who are only concerned with profits. Anything that reduces or threatens those profits is eliminated: Investigative journalism because it's too expensive; government accountability because it pisses off politicians and regulators who dole out billion-dollar policy favors like media "deregulation"; corporate accountability because it angers corporations like the long list that pulled Air America funding. Good journalism can be bad for business.

3) Note the presence of the U.S. Post Office and U.S. Navy on the list of advertisers who have blackballed Air America. It is an outrage that public monies are being deployed to push the ideological agenda of the Bush Administration, or any other administration for that matter. This is one more example of the corruption of governance in Washington, where big money and political power are picking over the bones of democracy.

What's left? Timid, lapdog journalism that fills our TV screens and radio dials. A newspaper market dominated by a handful of massive firms that suffer the same symptoms Cheap to produce reality shows, celebrity fluff, regurgitated press releases, spin assessing other spin, and entertainment-as-news that titillates but rarely informs.

Obviously we have to stop the corruption in Washington that allows this "business as usual." But there are three specific and crucial areas that demand our attention:

First, we must stop further media consolidation. This episode vividly illustrates the peril of monopoly media power. Bush's man at the Federal Communications Commission is actively moving to lift some of the last remaining ownership limits. The dream scenario for Big Media: eliminate ownership rules so one company can own all the media in a town, and have one newsroom serve all outlets. Heaven for the

intelligence to prevent the mild order of disaster which might result from inattention; but increase the speed of the vehicle and the sequence of operations instantly changes. With a modern automobile you require not only roads but good roads. You cannot drive at sixty miles an hour on blind earth; the faster your rate of motion the smoother must be the path you traverse. Speeds of that order require a given curvature of road to prevent disaster, the maximum curvature possible for a road designed to carry traffic at any given speed can be determined in advance--and this determination will have no regard of the personal idiosyncrasies and capacities of the operator.

We have been experiencing a change in the magnitude of social operations due to the accelerating rate of doing work on this Continent. For precisely the same reasons we must consider, quantitatively, without personal allowances, the proper conditions under which this work may be accomplished smoothly.

It has often been said that if we could take the Chinese and somehow raise them bodily to the standard of living that prevails on the American Continent, not only China and the Orient would be benefited thereby, but prosperity would return to the United States and the Occident. Such reasoning is characteristic of the present confusion in social thinking which is still based upon the classical economics of human labor and 'value.' When, however, one realizes that prior to 1830 we, on this Continent and everywhere else in the world, consumed not over 2,000 kilogram-calories of extraneous energy per capita per day, and that in 1929 we, on this Continent alone, consumed a maximum of 154,000 kilogram-calories of extraneous energy per capita per day when we realize this, the problem of China takes on a new and unsuspected aspect. In brief, in order to raise the standard of living of China to the present level of the North American Continent it would be necessary to expend two and one-half times the total energy consumed by the entire globe in 1929--a little puzzle which we may reasonably doubt even the capacity of the Chinese to solve.

Now, in 1933, after three years of the most unprecedented conditions that this country has ever known, when the oscillations of production have gone to greater extremes than have ever been witnessed in any preceding depression, we find ourselves with more unemployed than we had total population a century ago. Each succeeding declination in the production curves of pig-iron or of almost any other major industrial commodity swings lower, calling more forcibly to our attention the problems peculiar to a society increasingly dependent upon the correct operation of its physical equipment. It is these problems which Technocracy now poses, stating in particular that the continued substitution of physical energy for man-hours results, not in technological unemployment, but in a reduction of total employment and of total purchasing power.

Granting this inexorable replacement of human labor by physical energy, Technocracy makes the further statement that such a condition brings the social mechanism of this Continent into sharp conflict with the interference control vested in the Price System of production. The Price System, which we have defined as 'any exchange or energy flow control founded upon a commodity valuation,' originated under those social conditions where human labor was the prime factor in the performance of work and the creation of wealth. The 'values' upon which this system rests and by which alone it may continue to function might be described as the condensation of human perspiration. Once you eliminate that sheer human toil becomes functionally insignificant--you have struck at the very heart of the Price System fundamental postulate is the continuance of man-hours as an appreciable factor in the total energy consumed by society. You cannot continue to eliminate man-hour and expect the Price System to remain stable: It will go out of balance in proportion to the rate of social change and social change is here quantitatively defined as proportional to the rate of substitution of extraneous physical for man-hours in the operation and maintenance industrial social mechanism.