

# Plastic containers melt into capitol question

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SALEM — Item: plastic bottles.

Plastic producers and soft drink bottlers say they're safe, recyclable and energy efficient. But House majority whip Grattan Kerans, D-Eugene, is probably best described as diametrically opposed to the industry position.

At issue is HB 2008, a bill proposed by Kerans which would place a statewide ban on the use of plastics for carbonated beverage containers. The bill would apply to soft drinks and beer.

Last Thursday, assisted by research intern Jay Howe, Kerans told the House Environment and Energy Committee that he believes evidence shows that such containers pose potential health hazards to the public.

But a cavalcade of soft drink and plastic industry representatives testified before the committee Tuesday, declaring their faith in plastic bottles and refuting Kerans' testimony.

The problem, according to Kerans, is that the plastics used for carbonated beverage containers "migrate." That is, some of the molecules in the plastics are released into the contents of the bottle.

He contends that the molecules released by acrylonitrile and polyethylene terephthalate plastics — the two plastics approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for containing carbonated beverages — are "known to cause birth defects," and are suspected to cause cancer.

Kerans said the "toxicity of the chemicals which migrate from plastic bottles has been inadequately researched."

The FDA relied heavily on a 1947 study of acrylonitrile in setting a limit on allowable concentrations of the substance. But Kerans cites an FDA finding that "the study is inadequate to define accurately a no-effect level for acrylonitrile." He believes further research into the matter should be done before the plastics are allowed on the market.

Kerans said that the study showed birth defects in test animals and the possibility of cancerous tumors. The study, he said, concluded that "the toxic effects of acrylonitrile are cumulative following repeated administration."

Another problem with the containers, Kerans said, is that they "emit poisonous gases (including hydrogen cyanide) when incinerated." Although not necessarily posing a serious threat to the quality of our air, the discharge of poisonous gases could prove hazardous in a variety of situations," his report stated.

Also, "they probably cannot be recycled into new generations of beverage containers," he said, pointing out that the bottles may "create a significant new source of solid waste." He added that the bottles are "wasteful of limited petrochemical supplies."

In February of this year, the FDA announced that it would halt the use of such plastic containers, but is presently involved in a lawsuit with the Monsanto Corp., one of the largest producers of plastic bottles. The outcome of the case may well decide the fate of plastic bottles in Oregon as well as the nation.

Soft drink bottlers had hoped to begin using the containers in the state this month, but are apparently holding back pending the outcome of the court case and the decision on HB 2008.

"The only fact that could be entered in defense (of plastic bottles) is a claim for slightly increased energy efficiency and the basis for that is tenuous at best," said Kerans.

Calling the acceptance of plastic bottles "reckless in the extreme," Kerans said, "I do not believe this committee or this legislative assembly is prepared to run such enormous risks for such pitifully small returns."

On the other side of the fence, equally vehement and equally sure of their facts are the plastic industry and the bottling industry.

Percy Stone of the Continental Co. plastic container program, said his company "is examining the plastic bottles to the best of our abilities and it still appears to us to be a good idea."

"No public corporation with major development over decades is going to introduce deliberately a carcinogenic threat," he said. "If we find there is such a threat, we won't proceed."

He added that plastic bottles will "probably make a better container," and may be refillable in the future. He explained that a method for making the bottles refillable has not yet been developed.

Representatives of the New York-based Society of the Plastics Industry, Inc., (SPI), also appeared at the hearing. E.S. Nuspliger, director of public affairs, said plastic bottles "can be recycled, and are the safest type of container the public could use."

Nuspliger said the burning of plastic bottles results in a possible safety hazard "only in the most extreme conditions." He said gases cause "no problems" if the bottles are burned in "an efficiently operated incinerator, with modern air pollution control equipment and properly controlled combustion."

Another SPI report states that plastic bottles "save energy in daily commerce because of their light weight, which makes them cheaper and more convenient to transport."

One industry spokesperson said recent studies by the DuPont Corp. and Monsanto have shown that plastic bottles are safe.

Representatives of bottling companies felt that the bill discriminates against soft drink producers. "Singling out the soft drink industry in this bill is totally discriminatory based on the multitude of plastics used in both foods and non-food items," said George Rouches, president of the Oregon Soft Drink Association.

Douglas LeFevre, a Pepsi bottler, wheeled two shopping carts laden with plastic packaged "competitive products" into the hearing room to demonstrate the point.

The debate will continue in the committee meeting next week, which is as yet unscheduled. Kerans, who said Wednesday he believes he has an "ironclad case" in the controversy, indicated that he will again testify in order to rebutt the industry testimony.

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