

Opening Statement of Senator Bob Casey

Commerce Committee, Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Insurance

Hearing on "Formaldehyde in Textile and Consumer Products"

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening today's hearing and for the opportunity to testify about the dangers to consumers from formaldehyde use in textiles and other consumer goods. This important safety issue was first brought to my attention by Dr. David Brookstein of Philadelphia University. I understand that that Dr. Brookstein is here to testify. I thank him for his efforts to bring attention to this issue and I look forward to hearing his testimony.

Formaldehyde has a number of commercial uses including as an adhesive, a resin applied to paper goods and as insulation. Formaldehyde has long been used in the textile industry to make clothing crease-resistant, or wrinkle free.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) has identified formaldehyde as a potential hazard. In 1997, the CPSC issued a report on the dangers of formaldehyde. The report among other things stated that, "formaldehyde is a colorless, strong-smelling gas. When present in the air at levels above 0.1 ppm (parts in a million parts of air), it can cause watery eyes, burning sensations in the eyes, nose and throat, nausea, coughing, chest tightness, wheezing, skin rashes, and allergic reactions. It also has been observed to cause cancer in scientific studies using laboratory animals and may cause cancer in humans." Yet, despite these findings, the CPSC has yet to take any action on testing textiles for dangerous levels of formaldehyde.

The United States trails other nations in responding to the threats of formaldehyde. Australia, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Norway, China, Japan, Poland, Russia, Lithuania and South Korea have all adopted standards for formaldehyde use, particularly in textiles and clothing.

We need similar protections in the United States. The risks of not setting standards, and waiting until after major problems surface, are too great. American consumers deserve protection from dangerous goods and they necessarily rely on the government for this protection. It is a simple fact that consumers can't test products on their own. We need to make sure that the products we bring to market are safe, particularly those used by children.

Some may argue that many domestic and international manufacturers already adhere to self imposed standards on formaldehyde use in goods ranging from apparel to particle board. However, these voluntary standards do not carry penalties for violators and there is evidence that

foreign manufacturers in China have ignored the standards. According to the Associated Press, the New Zealand government launched an investigation into Chinese garments imported to New Zealand after children's clothes from China were found to contain dangerous levels of formaldehyde. In 2007, according to the American Apparel and Footwear Association, more than 25% of clothes sold in the United States were imported from China.

As a first step to developing regulations, we need to better understand the dimension of the problem. Currently, we do not even have a basic understanding of the scope of formaldehyde use in products. We need additional information about the prevalence of formaldehyde in goods and, most importantly, the impact it is having on American consumers.

To assist in reaching that goal, I successfully sponsored an amendment to the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act which calls for a study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the use of formaldehyde in the manufacture of textile and apparel articles. The law gave the GAO until August 2010 to complete its study. I understand from the GAO that they have not yet begun work on the report. I would like to take the opportunity today to encourage GAO to commence work on this important study. I look forward to reviewing their findings once completed.

It is my hope that today's hearing will provide an opportunity to learn more about the dangers of formaldehyde use in consumer products. Congress' oversight responsibilities with respect to executive agencies are among its most important functions. As such, I would like to commend Senator Pryor for his efforts at oversight and for bringing attention to this issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these comments. I look forward to joining the members of the Committee to listen to the expert testimony and ask questions of the witnesses. The information added today to the public record, in addition to the report by GAO, will lay the groundwork for necessary regulation of this harmful chemical. I will reiterate my assertion that we trail other countries in setting a safety standard on this issue. I hope that our efforts today will change this fact and that in the end this hearing will result in stronger protections for children and families.