

Flame retardant pollution in Great Lakes is a serious matter, commission says



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© K Martinko -- The deceptively pure-looking waters of Lake Huron, as seen from the Bruce Peninsula in Ontario

The International Joint Commission has developed a strategy for how U.S. and Canadian governments can address this toxic problem.

The International Joint Commission (IJC) has urged the Canadian and American governments to take action on toxic flame retardants accumulating in the Great Lakes basin. In a **report** published in November, the IJC stated that levels of polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs) have reached a point that could be harmful to human health. Levels are highest in Lakes Erie and Huron, but are found everywhere.

PBDEs have been used as flame retardants since the 1970s. They are deliberately added to a wide range of commercial and consumer products, such as appliances, furniture, electronic devices, plastics, mattresses and carpets. While there has been some government action taken to limit the use of PBDEs in the manufacture of new items, the chemicals leak into the environment when old products are disposed of, whether sent to landfill or recycled. The Lake County News Chronicle **describes it** as “a legacy problem that will linger far beyond the life of products.”

Flame retardants are present in the water, air, sediment, wildlife, and humans who live near the Great Lakes. This is deeply concerning because *these chemicals are persistent (never break down), toxic, and bioaccumulative (meaning the chemicals are absorbed by the body faster than it can excrete them)*. Exposure to PBDEs has been linked to thyroid disorders, birth defects, infertility, cancer, and neurobehavioral disorders. For wildlife, it means “increased mortality rates, malformations, and thyroid system and metabolic impairment.”

The report insists that chemical control is needed throughout the entire life cycle:

“The full product life cycle-- from initial design to final disposal – must be considered and controlled. PBDEs illustrate the problems that are created when the environmental fate of a chemical product is either not anticipated or externalized to society at large. In the future, manufacturers should be encouraged or mandated to consider the full life cycle in the design of new products, using environmentally benign materials instead of hazardous chemicals, or to reduce the need for chemical additives.”

The IJC recommends that the Canadian and U.S. governments take the following actions immediately:

- 1) Develop and implement a binational strategy to reduce these chemicals in the Great Lakes basin before the end of 2017
- 2) Create equally effective restrictions on creation, sale, and use of PBDEs throughout the region
- 3) Develop, together with stakeholders, a plan for eliminating potential releases of PBDEs during recycling and disposal stages
- 4) Guide industries to avoid chemical use and come up with safer alternatives; require industries to obtain government approval for any chemical substitutions
- 5) Create a registry of all products containing PBDEs and conduct ongoing monitoring of chemical levels in the Great Lakes

The IJC was created as part of the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, in order to resolve any disputes between Canada and the United States over the use of shared water. It takes seriously its role to protect in every sense. This report is a response to the General Objective, which states that the waters of the Great Lakes should be “**free from pollutants in quantities or concentrations that could be harmful to human health, wildlife, or aquatic organisms, through direct exposure or indirect exposure through the food chain.**”

Read full report [here](#).

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Vindaloo Bugaboo - 5 days ago

The Great Lakes contain 5,472 cubic miles of fresh water. How can PBDE levels possibly be that high to impact health? The water is continuously being flushed out through the St. Lawrence seaway and with the scourge of zebra mussels plaguing the waters, these chemicals are being filtered out along with everything else. This just makes no sense.

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Changeneededbadly - 6 days ago

We all could be spared the ramifications of this and many other problems if this idiotic species would take the precautionary principle seriously.

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Rahn - 6 days ago

This should land in the laps of the people who produced the chemicals and the people who used them in manufacturing products. Whoever, I'm sure everyone but them will pick up the tab for clean up. For God's sake though just start cleaning it up. My family loves the U.P. and can't stand the thought of those amazing lakes being abused.

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Matt — Anything and everything - one less ounce of petroleum consumed is one more ounce in the right direction.

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Brian — Perhaps so, but most vegetables can be eaten raw. We can't eat meat without cooking it, or we would get sick ...

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