

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Budget Estimates 2012-2013, 30 & 31 May and 1 June 2012

Question: E12-396

OUTCOME 1: Population Health

Topic: Polybrominated Flame Retardants

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Number of pages: 2

Senator: Senator Di Natale

Questions:

The questions below relate to polybrominated flame retardants (PBDEs): pentabromodiphenyl ether (pentaBDE) and octabromodiphenyl ether (octaBDE). Australia supported the listing of these chemicals as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) under the Stockholm Convention in 2010. I understand that the Government is currently considering ratification under the domestic treaty making process, but immediate concerns have been raised regarding the impact of these chemicals on the population, particularly children. The Stockholm Convention Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) Review Committee expressed concern that brominated flame retardants listed in the treaty could be used in recycled goods such as carpet backing. The POPRC technical review says, 'the incorporation of pentaBDE in carpet cushion which generates the highest levels of dust in the zones where children are playing is therefore of particular concern. It is notable that dust releases increases as carpet ages thus exposing the children of poorer families more heavily – an exposure reflected in the published literature'.

- a) Has FSANZ or the Department of Health and Ageing responded in any way to the above warning from the Stockholm Convention Persistent Organic pollutants technical review? If no, is FSANZ or the Department of Health and Ageing aware of any response by any government department to the review?
- b) In light of the findings of this review, what steps has FSANZ and the Department of Health and Ageing taken to protect the Australian consumer?

Answers:

a) & b) Australian regulatory actions on pentaBDE and octaBDE were taken following the establishment of risk profiles of these chemicals by the Persistent Organic Pollutants Review Committee (POPRC) of the Stockholm Convention in 2006 and 2007, respectively. The Australian regulatory actions follow preliminary risk assessment by the National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme (NICNAS) under the Priority Existing Chemicals review program.

The Department of Health and Ageing responded to the warning from the Stockholm Convention Persistent Organic pollutants technical review by removing octaBDE from Australia's Inventory of Chemical Substances in February 2007. This means that the chemical octaBDE cannot be manufactured in or imported into Australia except for use in laboratories for research purposes. This use must be reported annually to NICNAS.

In March 2007, the Minister for Health and Ageing also prohibited the manufacture and import of the chemical pentaBDE until a full public health risk assessment was completed. This risk assessment is being finalised by NICNAS. The interim prohibition of pentaBDE was based on a precautionary approach pending the completion of a full risk assessment. The prohibition also applies to mixtures, but not articles, containing this chemical. While articles containing pentaBDEs (eg carpet underlays) may continue to be imported into Australia, the quantity of the chemical in imported articles is expected to decline given international regulatory and voluntary activity.