Plastic disaster breaks through to mainstream: scandal over bisphenol-A

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #180 --
Our country is at a pivotal point in public health policy as it relates to our petroleum lifestyle. The implications cover consumerism's dead(ly) end and the demise of cheap energy from fossil fuels.

Bisphenol-A is the basic component of hard plastics that include baby bottles, linings of food cans, sealants for jars and bottles, and other well-known products that modern people have become dependent on. After several years of news stories about scientific studies and a few legislative attempts to ban or regulate bisphenol-A and other poisonous plastics, a scandal has just emerged involving U.S. government favoritism for corporate perpetrators.

Plastics such as bisphenol-A cause breast cancer, testicular cancer, diabetes, obesity, and birth defects -- although the evidence is often argued to apply so far only to laboratory animals. Other common plastics posing great danger include phthalates (softeners) and PVC (for piping, flooring, containers, etc.).

Despite the obviously questionable use of synthetic materials pervasive in a society ruled by profit maximizers, and several warnings in the news, little has changed until perhaps now. Blind faith in scientific progress for daily convenience also delays full realization of the error of plastics-dependence. Overcoming this may be harder than punishing corporate wrongdoers and banning chemicals.

John Dingell, Democratic Congressman of Michigan, has successfully defended Detroit's automakers for decades. This has assured the optimum pollution and energy waste associated with millions of cars made each year. But when a powerful politician has seen fit to maintain a friendly relationship with a major industry, he or she can be free to compensate or seek redemption by pursuing justice and environmental protection in other areas. Now he finds himself in a major role as a Congressional committee chairman (Commerce and Energy) spearheading the investigation of the Food and Drug Administration's hiding the clear danger of bisphenol-A.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported on March 21:

Ignoring hundreds of government and academic studies showing a chemical commonly found in plastic can be harmful to lab animals at low doses, the Food and Drug Administration determined the chemical was safe based on just two industry-funded studies that didn't find harm.

In response to a congressional inquiry, Stephen Mason, the FDA's acting assistant commissioner for legislation, wrote in a letter that his agency's claim relied on two pivotal studies sponsored by the Society of the Plastics Industry, a subsidiary of the American Chemistry Council.

Such a revelation is not surprising to those who understand our corrupted way of governance and our unfounded faith in mass technology. Yet, when awareness is sparked by alarming news that hits home, and the bigger picture can be glimpsed, it's time to make the connections for all who are receptive.

Since the discovery of the northern Pacific Ocean's major garbage patches in the huge current-gyre, composed of plastic debris ingested by countless fish and birds, the campaign against the plastic plague has gathered momentum. With documentaries such as Our Synthetic Sea, and the historic banning of plastic bags by San Francisco and other cities and by entire nations, a movement against plastics has made significant progress. Some leaders, such as Ross Mirkarimi, member of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, have made the connection between plastic waste and peak oil, climate change and war for oil. Culture Change has reported on these developments and connections since 2004, and has aided the anti-plastics movement in various ways from the local to national to global levels.

Following the European Union's example, the State of California and the City of San Francisco have passed legislation to limit babies' and children's exposure to bisphenol-A and phalates. Significantly, water bottles made of plastic have been banned by governments of certain cities for departmental use. Bans of plastic water bottles are on tap for San Francisco, Oakland, and elsewhere.

This is eminently reasonable when we realize that "More than 6 billion pounds of bisphenol-A are produced annually in the United States, for use in an array of products, including dental sealants and baby bottles. The chemical has been found in the urine of 93% of Americans tested." (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Despite the dispiriting news that industry and government have combined to "fool us again," this scandal is most useful for awakening the public. Our challenge is to make sure we don't repeat the pattern of trying to stamp out another brush fire or point blame, but rather to see the overall threat of plastics and petroleum dependence. All plastics should be assumed unsafe for food, water and our skin.

The assault on our oceans from plastic trash that does not biodegrade must end as soon as possible. The connection to petrochemicals and fossil fuels must be recognized and acknowledged daily. It is time to reject the filth and tragedy of plastics pollution and the related crimes -- climate change, war for oil, and species loss -- to the Earth and its people.

Plastic in the environment is like an oil spill that hit decades ago and will be with us for centuries, affecting humanity's survival. Will we now deal with this disaster and act with responsibility for our planet and our fellow life forms? The benefits include emancipating ourselves from oil companies and the downsides of globalization, materialism and dehumanization that we have allowed like sheep to the slaughter. A better way of life is at hand for those willing and able to change and begin cooperation with conscious neighbors.

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Further reading:

Baby formula companies use bisphenol-A

Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.) information on Jan. 17 from seven manufacturers of infant formula: Did the companies sold liquid infant formula in cans lined with bisphenol A? If so, did the company test for its presence? How much did it detect? By Feb. 8, all of the companies replied.

Companies using bisphenol-A in the linings of liquid infant formula cans:

Abbott: maker of RCF, Isomil and Similac infant formulas

PBM Products: maker of Bright Beginnings infant formulas

Nestl Nutrition: maker of Good Start infant formulas

Mead Johnson Nutritionals: maker of Enfamil and Nutramigen infant formulas

These companies do not make liquid infant formulas or pack their formula in containers other than aluminum cans and are not required to respond:
Hain Celestial Group and Solus Products LLC: maker of Earth's Best organic infant formula

Wyeth Nutrition: maker of S-26, SMA and Bonna infant formula

Source: House Committee on Energy and Commerce/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

CHEMICAL FALLOUT: A JOURNAL SENTINEL WATCHDOG REPORT

Warning: Chemicals in the packaging, surfaces or contents of many products may cause long-term health effects, including cancers of the breast, brain and testicles; lowered sperm counts, early puberty and other reproductive system defects; diabetes; attention deficit disorder, asthma and autism. A decade ago, the government promised to test these chemicals. It still hasn't. (Read the November-December 2007 Journal Sentinel report)
Journal Sentinel Investigations

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"FDA Relied on Industry Studies to Judge Chemical Safety: Response comes in congressional inquiry on use of bisphenol A", March 21, 2008, by Susann Rust:

jsonline.com

Our Synthetic Sea: award-winning DVD on plastics in the oceans and humans, available from the Algalita Marine Research Foundation:
algalita.org

"Plastics are on the run in San Francisco, the nation’s anti-petroleum capital" by Jan Lundberg. Culture Change Letter #

156 - March 29, 2007:

culturechange.org

Older Culture Change reports: "Plastics: Your Formidable Enemy: Questioning exposure, recycling, biodegradability, alternatives" (see links at bottom to more recent reports such as "War on Plastics"): culturechange.org

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