

EXHIBIT 15  
DATE 3-23-05  
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549-1982

## SJ 15 Testimony

Madame Chair and members of the committee, my name is Dori Gilels. I am the Northern Rockies Program Director of Women's Voices for the Earth, a resident of Missoula and a mother of two. Thank you for taking time to hear testimony on this important resolution.

Toxic chemicals are everywhere – in the air we breathe, in our food and water, in common household products we consume - and even in women's breastmilk. Today there are between 80,000-100,000 chemicals in commerce and only a small percentage have ever been screened for even one potential health effect, such as cancer, reproductive toxicity, developmental toxicity, or impacts on the immune system.

Breastmilk is a convenient body fluid to obtain and study and it provides a good proxy for contamination levels experienced by the developing fetus. Researchers believe that the most significant health concerns with flame retardant chemical contamination stem from *in utero* exposures rather than exposure through breastfeeding. Studies on lab animals have shown that these chemicals can impair memory and learning, alter behavior, delay sexual development and disturb thyroid hormone levels.

PBDEs degrade slowly in the environment and increase in concentration as they move up the food chain. Scientists believe these chemicals are doubling in concentration every 2 to 5 years. Although we acknowledge the importance of fire retardation materials and the value they have in saving lives, we have the technology in this country to do that in a non-toxic way.

In a recent regional study examining the presence of PBDEs in women's breastmilk, all three PBDE congeners (penta, octa and deca) were detected. The good news is that the production of penta and octa was discontinued at the end of last year due to a voluntary agreement between the Environmental Protection Agency and the major U.S. manufacturer. However, deca, the most widely used of the three compounds, will continue to be produced and added to a long list of consumer electronics products. The regional study found deca at concentrations of up to 4 parts per billion as measured in milk fat. This level exceeds the total concentrations of all PBDEs --including deca, octa and penta PBDEs -- that is typically found in Japan or Northern Europe. Until recently, deca had not received the same regulatory scrutiny as other PBDE compounds, in part because it was thought to concentrate less in people. New research, however, finds that deca may be more toxic than was previously thought.

Women cannot choose to avoid PBDE exposure. The prevalence of these chemicals and the myriad ways in which we might be exposed (handling products, inhaling dust, eating and digesting food) also suggests that *everyone* is contaminated.

In February of this year, the American Academy of Pediatrics released its strongest set of recommendations for breast-feeding. They stated, "breast-feeding ensures the best

possible health as well as the best developmental and psychosocial outcomes for the infant." This is all the more reason why we must not allow chemicals like PBDEs to poison this essential food source.

As a mother of two breastfed children (one of which I am still nursing), I fervently believe that a woman's decision to breastfeed and to provide a pure and essential food source for her baby is a fundamental human right. The contamination of this sacred food is a violation of that privilege. Research shows that despite the presence of toxic chemicals, breastfeeding is still the healthiest choice for infants. Nevertheless, we must not be complacent. We have to stop asking women to assume responsibility for avoiding exposure to hazardous chemicals by making endless adjustments and sacrifices in their lifestyle. The rapid elimination of chemicals like PBDEs must be a societal obligation. In the name of our children, I urge the Montana legislature to pass SJ15.

Thank you.

*Submit testimony on behalf of Rebekah Griffin, a Montana mother who participated in the regional study*

*Submit copies of the joint letter, co-authored by Women's Voices of the Earth and Dr. Dana Headapohl, Director of Occupational & Environmental Health Services at Saint Patrick Hospital in Missoula, endorsed by a dozen healthcare providers and research professionals across the state*