

Closing the Gap Between Environmental & Workplace Protections against Toxics

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Workshop Presentation Summary

We all deserve as much protection against toxic chemicals at work as we get in the community. But current OSHA "standards" for many chemicals that cause cancer or reproductive harm are often thousands of times weaker than the counterpart environmental standards. Typical examples are TCE,perc, benzene, nitromethane, captan and diesel.

The same disparity between workplace and environmental protection exists everywhere in the world. The health impact of this huge disparity is borne largely by non-unionized workers of childbearing age, by low-wage workers of color and immigrant workers and in chemically-intensive jobs (e.g. electronics manufacturing, cleaning and maintenance work, chemical manufacture, automotive repair, cosmetology).

The cost of NOT closing this gap is huge. In California alone more than 23,000 workers are disabled each year by chemically-caused exposures; another 6,600 die of workplace-chemical exposures (mainly cancer, COPD, and cardiovascular disease). Preventing these tragedies conserves health, productivity and scarce health care dollars.

The cost of lifetime care for children born in a single year in the US with major birth defects exceeds \$8 billion. Taking action to prevent any fraction of these tragedies by protecting workers of child-bearing age from toxic harm is life-saving and economically smart.

Worksafe! is the sponsor of the first state legislation in the world that would close this gap. AB 815 (Lieber) would require standards setting for toxics in the workplace to use the same science-based health protective approach used by agencies charged with protecting our air, water and soil from toxic contamination.

Because 25 of our 50 states have state OSHA plans and can thus set tough health-protective standards without federal OSHA's involvement, the AB 815 approach is an option that is now available for Alaska, **Arizona**, **California**, **Connecticut** (public employees only), Hawaii, Indiana, Iowa, **Kentucky**, **Maryland**, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, **New Jersey**, **New Hampshire**, **New York**, **North Carolina**, **Oregon**, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, **Washington**, and Wyoming.

(Note: The 11 states listed in **bold** are also among the sixteen states with laws or regulations supporting environmental justice. These states may be the first tier for building powerful occupational/environmental justice coalitions.)