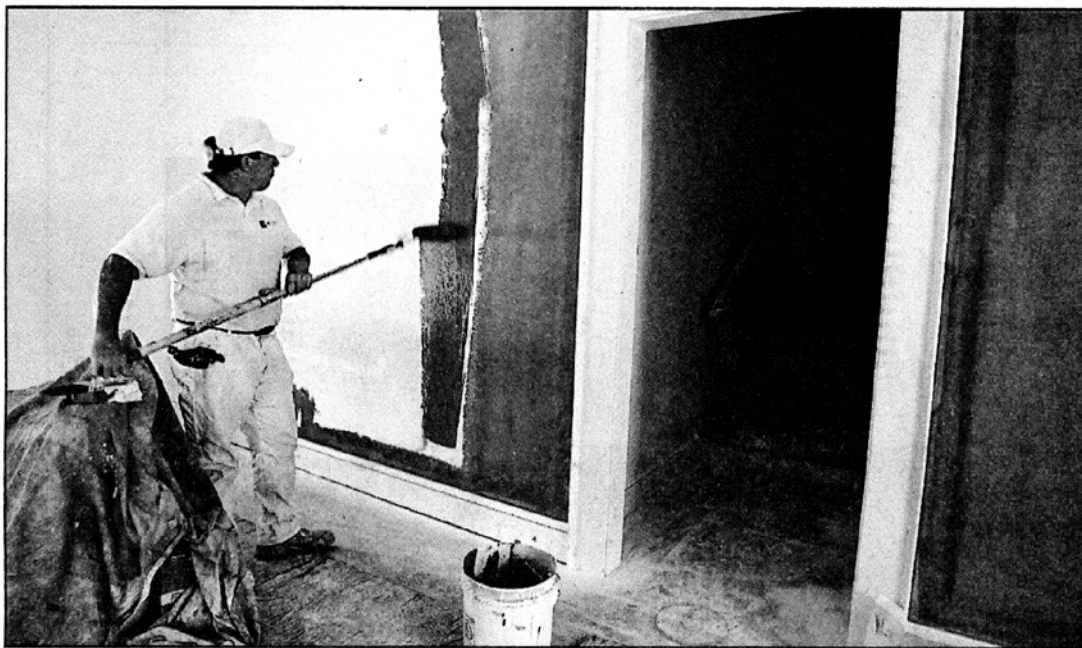


# The San Diego Union-Tribune

July 12, 2007

From paint to pills, disposal of unneeded products an issue



Companies are under pressure to take back products difficult to discard in an environmentally safe way, such as the leftover paint from Troy Payne's project in Hillcrest yesterday. *Laura Embry / Union-Tribune*

## Take-back efforts on rise

By Mike Lee, STAFF WRITER

When state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, learned that medications are polluting waterways nationwide, he decided to do something about it.

His idea, which several San Diego County sewage agencies are expected to vote today to support, is to require pharmacies take back outdated or unneeded medications so residents don't flush them down the toilet.

That's long been a common way to keep prescription drugs out of the hands of children, but it's no longer recommended because of its effects on fish and possibly on people.

Simitian's strategy builds on an emerging national trend to push companies that produce or distribute products to help reduce the environmental damage their goods cause.

Recent take-back campaigns across the country involve paint, plastic bags, computers, fluorescent light bulbs and devices such as thermostats that contain mercury.

Some of the industries being asked to take back the goods don't like the programs, but conservationists, public officials and some companies are embracing the concept as a way to keep the environment

SEE **Take-back campaigns, A10**

### HARD TO HANDLE

Manufacturers and distributors are under pressure to take back several products that are difficult to dispose of:

**Compact fluorescent bulbs:**  
Contain mercury



**Paint:** 65 million leftover gallons in the U.S. annually



**Motor oil:** California consumers returned 21 million gallons in '05



**Medications:** Are often flushed down the toilet



**Computers:**  
Loaded with toxic compounds



## ► TAKE-BACK CAMPAIGNS

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### State bill offers option on outdated, unwanted drugs

cleaner.

The costs typically are passed on to consumers in the form of surcharges or higher prices.

"The traditional view has been that once (a product) is out the door, it's not the retailer's problem anymore," Simitian said. "The traditional view is now being questioned."

In general, the targeted items don't have much effect on the environment in small quantities. But when they become ubiquitous and there are no coordinated disposal plans, they become potential hazards.

Plastic bags not only become litter, but they end up in lakes and oceans where they can injure birds and fish. Electronic devices can contain several pounds of toxic compounds that can poison people and animals if they are not handled properly.

In some cases, that damage has only recently been measured by scientists, prompting new programs and regulations. For example, drug disposal became an issue after a five-year-old federal study showed 80 percent of the streams sampled nationwide were laced with pharmaceuticals, steroids and reproductive hormones.

These types of drugs in waterways have been linked to changes in the sexual characteristics of fish, though it's not known yet if they affect human health.

This kind of contamination has led public-waste officials from San Diego to Boston to try to shift the cost and responsibility for waste disposal to the private sector.

With house paint, city and county hazardous waste programs spend about \$8 a gallon to properly dispose of what's left over, which translates into hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars annually across the nation.

Putting that burden on industry would ultimately trickle down to paint buyers, though some see that as fairer than general tax increases.

"There is a huge amount of industry that basically is set up and structured such that they externalize the cost of whatever happens to their products when they become waste," said Barbara Kyle, who manages the national Computer TakeBack Campaign in San Jose. "They count on us being able to deal with our stuff through publicly funded waste-management programs."

Take-back proponents say it's too cumbersome for state and local governments to establish offices and

programs for all of the products that demand special handling. They say it makes better sense for retailers to take back the products they sell, then turn them into more products when possible.

If faced with a stream of used returns, companies would try harder to design them with fewer toxins and parts that are easier to recycle, said Marjaneh Zarrehparvar, toxics reduction coordinator for the city and county of San Francisco. She's also a leader of the recently formed California Product Stewardship Council, a group of local government officials that promotes producer responsibility for an array of products.

"It isn't just that businesses are making money and they ought to pay for this," Zarrehparvar said. "The goal is really to improve the state of the environment, and we can do that during the manufacturing process by having the (products') end-of-life in mind."

California officials are trying to entice private industry with a state-sponsored study that shows customers who returned oil to retail stores under a voluntary take-back program spent an average of \$60 per visit.

Some companies need little convincing. Dell Inc., the Texas-based computer-maker, advertises that "meeting our customers' needs to retire end-of-life products is part of the total value we provide."

Dell voluntarily takes back its products for free, but company officials support a national policy that creates a level playing field.

In the paint industry, a national take-back test project is evolving after years of talks among retailers, recyclers, regulators and manufacturers. It's likely to involve the existing government-backed hazardous waste collection sites, as well as an expanded role for companies in funding and offering additional spots for returns.

Nationwide, some 65 million gallons of house paint are discarded each year, and much of it can be turned into new paint or used for other purposes, such as covering graffiti.

Scott Cassel, founder and director of the Product Stewardship Institute in Boston, said the paint take-back program started slowly but is gaining momentum. The institute represents states, including California, that seek national solutions for wastes that are hard to dispose of or recycle.

"This is the start of a big revolution in terms of manufacturers being forced to think more about what they are putting on the market and what happens to that product after it is no longer usable," Cassel said.

Companies forced to use take-back programs often include "eco-fees" in product prices to cover the costs, but they don't always disclose them to consumers. Californians already pay some product-specific recycling tolls even if the manufacturers aren't responsible for dealing with the wastes. For example,

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Companies forced to use take-back programs often include "eco-fees" in product prices to cover the costs, but they don't always disclose them to consumers. Californians already pay some product-specific recycling tolls even if the manufacturers aren't responsible for dealing with the wastes. For example, there's a charge of \$1.75 for a new tire and up to \$10 for many TVs and monitors.

Partly because of the expense, business groups balk at the concept. Large pharmacy outlets opposed Simitian's mandate for medicines, for example.

"The program . . . would be a costly mandate on chain drug stores and will present many legal obstacles and safety concerns," lawyers for Rite Aid wrote June 14 in a letter to the Assembly's Health Committee.

The bill was changed in the Assembly, where it's being reviewed by the appropriations committee. Instead of requiring take-back programs to start next year, it would allow drugstores to develop their own initiatives. A compulsory program would follow in 2011 if the voluntary approach doesn't meet certain milestones.

Meanwhile, studies continue off the San Diego coast to see what environmental effects pharmaceuticals are having in the ocean, and regional wastewater officials are working to craft the right response.

Poway tried a pharmaceutical collection program in April and received about 50 pounds of medicine. Public Works Director Jim Howell said it's likely too costly and time-consuming to replicate on a large scale.

At separate meetings today, Howell is asking solid waste and wastewater officials to support Simitian's plan.

"I'd like to . . . make it easy for the public to go to the pharmacy (for disposal) when they get their next prescription," Howell said. "That way, everybody pays their fair share."



# San Jose Mercury News

October 4, 2007

## *Bill to keep drugs out of drinking water needs only Schwarzenegger's signature*

By Joe Simitian

You got well faster than expected. You bought more medicine than you needed, and now it's past the expiration date. Or you tried something and it didn't work. Those leftover medications are sitting in your medicine chest, and they're worse than just clutter. They're hazardous household waste.

Getting rid of them responsibly requires, well, let me take you to the Web site of the California State Board of Pharmacy. It instructs: Keep the medicine in the original container. Scratch the personal information off the label. Put some water in with the pills, and also add sawdust, kitty litter, scouring cleanser or a spice, such as cayenne pepper. Seal it with duct tape. Put it in a box or envelope. Throw it in the trash.

Alternatively, you can drive across town to the local household hazardous waste disposal site.

Some California residents may be so conscientious and

so desperate for a way to fill time that they will follow these guidelines. For the other 99.9 percent, the sink or the toilet are within arm's reach of the medicine cabinet. Washed or flushed away, the medications will end up polluting a river, a lake or the bay.

Sitting on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's desk is a bill to make it easier for people to do the right thing. SB 966, which I introduced, would require the Integrated Waste Management Board to develop a plan, and test it in a statewide pilot program, for conveniently disposing of unused drugs.

One obvious possibility is to require pharmacies to take them back and be responsible for their proper disposal. The state of Washington has begun such a pilot program. Maine is setting up a system to mail back unused pharmaceuticals.

Last year, in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Bay Area Pollution Prevention Group and Save the Bay organized Safe Medicine Disposal Days, setting up 39 collection points. Walgreens stores and local law enforcement participated, too.

Nearly 4,000 pounds of drugs were collected for disposal. Imagine how much

could be collected by a permanent statewide system instead of local once-in-a-while events.

A collection system has to start by educating consumers. Why would anyone who's not a pharmacist or a freshwater biologist suspect any harm in flushing some outdated antibiotics away? It's just a few pills. And since they were made to be ingested, how bad could it be to send them down the drain?

The trouble is that the pharmacological soup begins to thicken when millions of medications are dumped into a sewage system that isn't designed to remove them as it cleans wastewater before putting it into rivers or the bay.

In 2002, when the U.S. Geological Survey sampled 139 streams in 30 states, it found that 80 percent had measurable concentrations of prescription and non-prescription drugs, steroids and reproductive hormones. Throwing medications into the garbage isn't much better. The active ingredients may take longer to reach the water table after leaching out of the landfill, but they get there.

Letting old medications accumulate at home is also not wise. They get taken by mis-

take in a middle-of-the-night sleepy grope for a pill. Or they are found by some youngster recklessly seeking a high. The solution here is simple: some sort of take-back plan.

My bill grew out of suggestions from two of my constituents in my annual "There Oughta Be a Law" contest, which asks people to propose legislation. Rebecca Kassel, at the time a 17-year-old Santa Cruz County high school student, and Mountain View resident Abe Binder were both concerned about drugs being flushed away.

"The next generation should have access to clean water, air and food," Binder said. "Whatever cheap, simple and effective measures we as citizens can come up with to protect California's water should be vigorously pursued." I agree.

Cheap, simple and effective solutions aren't near at hand for every environmental problem. When they are, as with the disposal of unused pharmaceuticals, the governor ought to grab them. The Legislature has done its part by passing SB 966. If the governor signs his name, California will be on the path to pulling one more pollutant out of our water.

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**JOE SIMITIAN**, D-Palo Alto, represents the 11th State Senate District and is the author of SB 966. He wrote this article for the Mercury News.