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Opponents of plastic pipes win battle in a long war

By Katherine Conrad

A coalition fighting against plastic pipes in residential plumbing won a partial victory when the state agreed to keep its restrictions against several types of the controversial material.

But the battle that began 25 years ago in California pitting plastic against metal pipes is far from over.

Home builders favor plastic pipes because it is cheaper by a few thousand dollars per house, and it's easier to install than copper. Opponents say the chemicals in plastic pipes pose health and environmental risks.

Roughly every three years, the state's Housing and Community Development Department updates the California Plumbing Code. The Building Standards Commission was scheduled in January to accept the findings of an environmental impact report and consider lifting the restrictions on three kinds of plastic pipes. The pipes are currently either banned in California or allowed only in inland areas where the water and soil are so acidic that they cause copper pipes to leach.

Last week, the department's staff recommended keeping the restrictions on several kinds of plastic pipes -- cross-linked polyethylene known as PEX, polyvinyl chloride known as PVC, and acrylonitrile butadiene styrene -- but the Building Standards Commission will consider whether to allow chlorinated polyvinyl chloride or CPVC, in houses built in California.

The amount of pipe installed in a home ranges from 400 feet in a 1,000-square-foot townhouse to 1,000 feet in a 2,000-square-foot house. The regulations apply only to buildings where people sleep, such as houses and hotels.

Dick Church, executive director of the Plastic Pipe and Fittings Association based in Chicago, said California is the only state in the country that restricts use of the pipes.

"It's silly," he said. "There's no scientific basis. It won't hurt anybody, regardless of what the plumber's union says. This is a nationwide feud that has been going on for 50 years."

But the Coalition for Safe Building Materials claims that the plastic pipes spread fire, leach hazardous chemicals into the soil and cannot be recycled. The coalition includes the

Sierra Club, Consumer Federation of California, Communities for a Better Environment and the California State Pipe Trades Council.

Coalition attorney Tom Enslow said he believes that the plastic pipe industry is against allowing the product to be tested. ``It appears they don't want to admit to any flaws in their product.

“Having examined numerous environmental impact reports, this EIR doesn't even pass the smell test," he said. ``PVC is considered the dirtiest plastic from creation to death. It's a very dirty product to create, it releases toxins, and when you try to dispose of it, it's considered a contaminant."

Janet Huston, a spokeswoman for Housing and Community Development, said the staff was concerned about the questions raised regarding fire and toxic fumes.

“There is not significant environmental documentation to alleviate the concerns," she said.

The proposal to lift the restrictions against CPVC is scheduled to be considered by the department on Jan. 16.

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