Chemical companies are phasing out certain PFAS commonly used in fast food wrappers.

Companies agree to phase out short-chain substances that contain 6:2 fluorotelomer alcohol

Chemical manufacturers are planning to gradually ramp down sales of certain short-chain per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) used as grease-proofing agents on fast food wrappers, take-out containers, and other paper-based food packaging, the US Food and Drug Administration announced July 31.

AGC Chemicals Americas, Archroma Management, and Daikin America will phase out sales of substances that contain 6:2 fluorotelomer alcohol (6:2 FTOH) for use in paper and cardboard food packaging beginning in January 2021. The process is expected to take 3 years, with up to an additional 18 months to use up existing stocks. A fourth company, Chemours, told the FDA last year that it has already stopped selling the substances in the US market.

PFAS that contain 6:2 FTOH replaced long-chain PFAS in food packaging nearly a decade ago because of concerns about the safety of longchain PFAS, which are linked to cancer and immune disorders. FDA scientists, however, are now questioning the safety of those replacements. Data from rodent studies suggest that 6:2 FTOH accumulates in the body, the FDA reported in January (Toxcol. Appl. Pharmacol. 2020, DOI: 10.1016/j.taap.2020.114878).

“The data suggest the potential of 6:2 FTOH to also persist in humans from chronic dietary exposure,” the FDA says in a statement. “Further scientific studies are needed to better understand the potential human health risks from dietary exposure to food-contact substances that contain 6:2 FTOH.”

Rather than conduct those tests, the three manufacturers of the substances in question agreed to phase out sales in the US.

Some lawmakers welcome the agreement as a first step toward eliminating PFAS from food packaging, but they urge the FDA to do more. “Voluntary action by three companies is no substitute for a complete ban on these toxic "forever" chemicals,” Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) says in a statement. PFAS are often called “forever” chemicals because of their ability to resist degradation and persist in the environment. “As more turn to take-out meals during the pandemic, food packaging with PFAS has become even more dangerously prevalent. A comprehensive federal ban is the only really effective remedy, as I have long advocated,” Blumenthal says.

Some state and local legislators aren’t waiting for federal action. Several of them are considering measures to prohibit PFAS in food packaging in their jurisdictions. The Toxics in Packaging Clearinghouse, a coalition that pushed for removal of heavy metals in food packaging in the late 1980s, is circulating draft legislation for states to consider that would ban PFAS in food packaging. The update marks the first major change to the group’s model legislation in more than a decade.