

**3rd Annual Town Hall Meeting
Translating Breast Cancer and Environmental Research into Action**

Keynote Address

Exposing a Toxic U.S. Policy

Mark Schapiro
Editorial Director
Center for Investigative Reporting
Berkeley, CA

Author

Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products and What's at Stake for American Power

As a journalist long interested in issues surrounding toxic chemicals, Mark Schapiro sought to cast a light on the “mysterious shadows” lurking behind our every day consumer products. In his presentation to the Town Hall Meeting, Schapiro focused on power—who has it and how it is being used in the struggle around toxic compounds.

“There is an abundance of knowledge about chemicals,” he affirmed, “ but what is happening to it?” For the first time in American history, we are able to assess this information, but industry in the U.S. is battling to ignore it, at best, or discredit it completely by claiming a lack of scientific evidence for potential and actual dangers.

Contrary to American inertia, the European Union has taken a very different approach to environmental and consumer protection. The E.U., a body of 27 countries, has become the world's largest economic market that wants to “win the global competition”. They have recognized the dangers of these uninvited guests—toxic chemicals found in our blood—and have chosen to act aggressively. Their epidemiological evidence is no different than our own. Cancer, endocrine disruption, low sperm counts, and other conditions are being linked to toxic chemicals in our bodies.

In response, the E.U. passed a Cosmetics Directive in 1976, which now bans all carcinogens, mutagens, and reproductive toxins. In the U.S., the Safe Cosmetics Act, which was just recently passed with the help of many of the activists present at the Town Hall Meeting, only requires that the presence of certain toxic chemicals be *disclosed*, as described earlier in the meeting by Yvonne Beals and Julie Liou.

Similarly, the battle that Fiona Ma fought to ban phthalates from children's toys was fought 10 years earlier in the E.U. There it was determined that phthalates were so potentially dangerous that they were totally banned. The result was that

the Chinese toy manufacturers make their products for the E.U. without phthalates, but they are still included in toys sold in the U.S.

Schapiro went on to explain that while corporate interests in the U.S. say that consumer advocates are being alarmists and that banning these chemicals will be disastrous for the economy, the E.U. experience has been quite different. They have found the economic fears expressed by manufacturers have been “a great bluff”. Rather having negative impacts, the chemical bans have created opportunities for growth and development.

Many companies sell their products in both the E.U. and in the U.S., but do so using different formulations in order to comply with the applicable regulations. Schapiro described his experience of visiting the Brussels office of the largest U.S. personal care products company. When he asked how the company was responding to the chemicals ban, he was told that the company had hired toxicologists, removed the offending ingredients and replaced them with safer alternatives.

When he returned to California, Schapiro went to the Safe Cosmetics Act hearing in Sacramento. There he met the chief lobbyist against the Act, who was from the above-mentioned personal care products company. This man was testifying that just reporting the presence of toxic chemicals would be too onerous for the company, even though the company was clearly able to produce their products without them, as demonstrated in their E.U. formulations.

Currently, there is no controlling authority in the U.S. for cosmetics. The cosmetics manufacturers have established an advisory board, but its opinions are not binding. Schapiro recommended that we follow the example of the E.U., which has an independent testing authority whose results are binding and are available online to the public.

Schapiro warns that “Power has shifted...American citizens are being put in a position that would have been unimaginable a decade ago: in some instances (we are) a dumping ground for goods not wanted elsewhere in the world.”