

Mandatory Drug Take-back Programs Lack Scientific Support, Waste Resources

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SB 5234 and HB 1370 would require pharmaceutical manufacturers to participate in a mandatory drug take-back program to collect unused or unwanted drugs. Previous versions of drug take-back legislation focused on using take-back programs to remove trace elements of drugs from the environment.

Although the focus in current legislation has partly shifted away from environmental concerns, SB 5234 and HB 1370 still claim that “disposing of medicines by flushing them down the toilet or placing them in the garbage can lead to the contamination of groundwater and other bodies of water, contributing to long-term harm to the environment and to animal life.”

Saying that mandatory drug take-back legislation will help the environment, however, ignores the scientific record related to disposing of drugs in the environment. In addition, trying to reduce the very minimal impact unused drugs have on the environment shows a failure by lawmakers to prioritize policies based on true environmental benefit and effectiveness.

Our research, “Drug Take-Back Programs: What Will They Solve” and “New study: Advanced Treatment Removes Drugs from Environment,” shows that drug take-back legislation is likely to increase costs for businesses and consumers, while providing no environmental benefit. Before lawmakers make producers implement a drug take-back program, they should consider the following key findings from our research:

- 1. Take-back programs and the environment:** To date, none of the scientific research shows that mandatory take-back programs reduce the small amount of drugs in the environment. This, in part, is because the drugs being found in the environment come from human and animal excretion after the use of drugs. As a side note, all of the take-back programs, including the program in British Columbia, as well as others in the U.S. and across Europe, were designed to deal with drugs in the environment and not with drug abuse. Comparisons to other programs should be limited to their effectiveness on the environmental protection, which, as we have shown is not supported by science.
- 2. EPA and DOE research:** A new study, “Pharmaceutical and Personal Care Products in Municipal Wastewater and their Removal,” conducted by the Department of Ecology and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports on the benefits of advanced technologies in removing the trace elements of pharmaceuticals and personal care products from the environment. The study finds, “Results of this screening indicate that the combination of enhanced biological nutrient removal and filtration processes provides the greatest PPCP removal.” Compared to effective

wastewater treatment, mandatory take-back programs do almost nothing for the environment, but they do increase the cost of medicine for consumers.

- 3. Federal guidance for disposal:** The EPA and White House have issued a clear directive for the disposal of unused or unwanted drugs. The federal rules are designed to reduce the diversion of prescription drugs, while also protecting the environment. These standards call for the disposal of unused or unwanted drugs by placing them in protected landfills, not flushing them.

If passed, these drug take-back proposals would not benefit the environment in any significant way, but would increase the cost of medical care for people who need life-saving drugs. Lawmakers should instead focus their efforts on policies that will provide the greatest environmental benefit. This can be accomplished by conducting a comprehensive cost/benefit analysis of the state's top environmental priorities, allowing the state to target taxpayer's resources on the solutions with the greatest environmental benefit.

Brandon Houskeeper is a policy analyst with Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan independent policy research organization in Washington state. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body. For more information, visit washingtonpolicy.org.