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Chemical-related illnesses cost state

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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) -- Toxic chemicals sicken and kill thousands of people in California each year and cost the state an estimated \$2.6 billion in medical expenses and lost wages, according to a new report released Thursday.

The study by University of California researchers details the economic, environmental and public health impacts of industrial chemicals and calls for state policies to phase out dangerous substances and promote safer alternatives.

"This area is an essential piece of a sustainable future," said Michael Wilson, a research scientist at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health. "We don't have a comprehensive policy on how chemicals and products are designed, used and disposed of in this state."

The report, "Green Chemistry: Cornerstone to a Sustainable California," was commissioned by the California Environmental Protection Agency and endorsed by 127 researchers at UC campuses and national laboratories in California. The researchers are scheduled to brief state lawmakers on their findings on Friday.

The researchers estimate that in 2004 more than 200,000 California workers suffered from chronic diseases linked to workplace exposure to industrial chemicals. Another 4,400 people died of those diseases, which include cancer, emphysema and Parkinson's disease.

Those illnesses cost state businesses, insurers and families \$1.4 billion in hospitalizations, drugs and other medical expenses, as well as lost compensation to workers who could no longer work, according to the report. Another 240,000 cases of asthma and other childhood diseases related to chemical exposure cost the state another \$1.2 billion.

While the study focuses on 2004 -- the most recent year for which data is available -- the numbers are representative of the impact of chemical exposure in California in a typical year, said Paul Leigh, an economist at UC Davis School of Medicine who analyzed existing data to develop the estimates.

Farmworkers, welders, hairdressers, beauticians and spray painters are among the workers most likely to be exposed to toxic chemicals on the job, according to the report.

The European Union is far ahead of the United

States in passing laws to ban toxic chemicals in favor of more environmental friendly alternatives, so many products that can't be sold in Europe are shipped to the U.S., Wilson said.

"As the rest of the world starts moving ahead, we become a market for the stuff no one else wants to buy," he said.

The report's authors urged California officials to take the lead in promoting "green chemistry," saying it represents an enormous opportunity for economic growth and could create a more predictable market for manufacturers.

"Their business liability could be reduced if they had some kind of clear standard," said UC Berkeley researcher Megan Schwarzman.

Chemical companies would welcome a more comprehensive state policy, rather than a "piecemeal" approach targeting specific chemicals or products, said John Ulrich, who heads the Chemical Industry Council of California and read the report.

Ulrich said the chemical industry was moving toward developing and marking safer, more eco-friendly products, pointing to Oakland-based Clorox Co.'s new line of "green" cleaning products that have been endorsed by the Sierra Club.

"Green chemistry is the natural evolution of a forward-looking industry," Ulrich said. "I think companies need to be looking in that direction, and they are looking in that direction."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger last year launched the California Green Chemistry Initiative to bring together scientists, policy makers and industry officials to develop policy recommendations for chemicals.

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