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WATER QUALITY ASSOCIATION PRESS RELEASE

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California poised to pass softener ban

Radical bill expected to go to governor's desk soon

LISLE, Illinois — The California state legislature will almost certainly pass a sweeping water softener ban law very soon, observers say.

The bill, AB 2270, passed out of the Senate Appropriations Committee by party line vote yesterday. It is expected to pass the whole Senate as early as next week and move to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's desk. The State Water Resources Control Board told the legislature that bans will not cost state government significant amounts of money. However, the law could cost homeowners untold sums.

"Those in the industry and homeowners need to make sure the governor knows how damaging this law would be," said Peter Censky, executive director of the Water Quality Association. "This drastic bill would do very little good for the environment and cause a lot of problems for homeowners throughout California."

The bill gives unelected water boards the power to decide whether towns can ban softeners. If a town chooses to announce a ban, policing power to enforce it would be necessary.

Water softeners often make a convenient target for regulation, said Censky, since they are so visible. However, studies have shown that the vast majority of salinity in the ground in California – close to 90 percent – comes from natural processes, mainly farming techniques and other sources. Water softeners contribute only slightly more than one-tenth of the salt.

The proposed bill would overturn decades of efforts that have been looking for sensible solutions to the issue of salinity, said Censky.

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ADD ONE

Softener ban

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The state and researchers in the water treatment industry began looking at the problem together in 1978. That is when California created efficiency standards for water softeners. The state set up guidelines to make sure that before a community bans water softeners, independent scientific studies show such a measure will significantly improve local ground conditions.

The current proposal to ban water softeners would overturn this approach. Under the bill, water boards – which are not answerable to the voters – would be able to simply issue a “finding” that they believe bans would be helpful. A statewide finding could be passed, too. Mike Mecca, past president of Pacific WQA, said the statewide board’s claim that there will be no cost to the state will be opposed.

Most consumers don’t realize it, but a water softener bought today will use much less salt per gallon of water than one purchased thirty or even ten years ago, Censky said. Millions of dollars have been spent to invent and develop greener softening technologies, and companies have committed even more. In fact, in Arizona, which faces similar problems to those in California, a partnership of regulators and industry researchers has begun setting forth an ambitious agenda to go even far beyond today’s improvements.

With a ban, law enforcement resources would likely have to be directed to combat a new black market in illegal water softener sales and installation. Illegal softeners would probably not feature the salt-saving elements of contemporary devices.

While salinity is a serious problem, the benefits of softeners should also be considered, Censky said.

According to a New Mexico State University study, water heaters can require up to 30 percent more power to operate with hard water. Large appliances wear out faster when forced to operate with hard water. Clothing and household linens are harmed by hard water. The minerals in hard water act as an abrasive on clothing, causing fibers to break. Hard water can cut the life of clothing by as much as one third and linens can wear out twice the normal rate, depending on how hard the water is.

For local comment, contact Mike Mecca, president, Pacific Water Quality Association, 730-644-7348.