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BRADLEY DUNN, Recycling Operations Manager
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Group Urges FDA to Change Pharmaceutical Waste Policy from ‘Flush’ to Stewardship

Allan Gerlat

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A call for a single national disposal system for pharmaceuticals has been made in a letter to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) from more than 100 organizations and individuals.

The letter to FDA Commissioner Stephen Ostroff urged the agency to end its “flush list” recommendation and instead create a single disposal guidance system, such as a pharmaceutical take-back program, that is endorsed by all federal agencies and communicated on all federal

websites and materials, according to a news release.

The coalition, which included environmental and health organizations, agencies, activists and state legislators, also called for the FDA to work more closely with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy to develop clear and consistent guidance for consumers regarding the safe disposal of leftover household medications.

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“Right now there is a real disconnect between the FDA and other federal agencies about the proper way of disposing unused medications,” said Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the National Stewardship Action Council, which is affiliated with the California Product Stewardship Council. “The FDA must end its recommendation of flushing medications, which has a negative impact on public health and water quality. Instead, by supporting take back programs and sending one unified message, we can increase the public’s trust of their government to protect their water supply.”

Estimates are that 30-40 percent of leftover and expired medications in American homes go unused. The flushing of medications contributes to pharmaceutical pollution in the environment, the organizations claim.

The group said medicine take-back programs are the safest way to dispose of unwanted medications. But federal agencies provide inconsistent messages on pharmaceutical disposal, and those messages often conflict with state and local regulations or guidance against flushing or disposal of the medications.

“Prevention at the source is the best way to keep pharmaceuticals out of wastewater and the environment,” said Bobbi Larson, executive director for the California Association of Sanitation Agencies. “Unused medications are frequently flushed down the toilet and make their way into wastewater streams and ultimately the environment. No drugs should be flushed.”

Scott Cassel, the founder and CEO of the leading national producer responsibility group, the Boston-based Product Stewardship Institute Inc., discussed with Waste360 recently some of the main issues the group is managing, and pharmaceuticals is near the top of the list. Cassel pointed out that the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the Alameda County (California) pharmaceutical ordinance took place last May, and the court did not hear the case. That upheld the right of Alameda County and any other jurisdiction in the United States to require the pharmaceutical industry to set up and pay for the take-back programs for pharmaceuticals. That has increased the interest by other local and state governments in producer take-back, as the industry itself has continued to be reluctant to move in that direction, he said.

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