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Medication take-back plan draws critics

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ALBANY — Leaders of a statewide product recycling group are urging Gov. Andrew Cuomo not to sign a new law creating a system for people to return old prescription drugs to pharmacies for proper disposal.

According to the New York Product Stewardship Council, the measure would unfairly charge customers, who would pay \$2 each for special drug-return envelopes, and chain pharmacies, which would have to sell envelopes and pay drug disposal costs, while large pharmaceutical makers would contribute nothing.

The not-for-profit council, which is made up of local waste management and recycling officials from across the state, advocates the shifting of costs off taxpayers and into the cost of products.

This summer, state lawmakers overwhelmingly passed the drug disposal measure, which aims at reducing the amount of prescription drugs that are being improperly disposed off, either by being flushed down toilets or thrown away.

Such improper disposal is contributing to a rising level of pharmaceuticals in rivers and other waterbodies, said Ed Gottlieb, a member of the stewardship council who also oversees the wastewater treatment plant in Ithaca, Tompkins County.

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Between 2010 and 2015, Gottlieb has run recycling events for people to bring in old medications. More than five tons have been collected so far.

Researchers have found that U.S. waterbodies are showing traces of a variety of medications that are making their way into fish and other aquatic life after being flushed or tossed into the garbage, and then into landfills. Drugs are also being excreted through human waste and into public sewer systems.

For example, researchers in Buffalo recently found fish in the Niagara River have measurable levels of human antidepressants in their brains. In streams around Baltimore, researchers found levels of 14 drugs, including amphetamines and methamphetamines.

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"Eventually, everything ends up in the wastewater plants, which are not engineered to remove everything," Gottlieb said.

Andrew Radin, executive director of the stewardship council, said the proposed law, in addition to placing costs of drug disposal on customers and pharmacies, rather than industry, won't provide adequate service to rural areas, since requirements apply only to chain pharmacies that have 10 or more locations.

And, he added, the law contains no requirements that drug returns be tracked by the state, so it will be difficult to determine how effective the program is.

Radin and Scott Cooper, CEO of the national not-for-profit Product Stewardship Institute, based in Boston, wrote the cover story.



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