

Coca-Cola Not Ready to Drop Bisphenol A in Can Linings

By Sarah Schmidt, Postmedia News April 27, 2011 6:03 PM

Facing pressure from a growing number of shareholders, Coca-Cola's top executive said Wednesday it would be premature to stop using bisphenol A in its can linings.

One in four shareholders — or 26 per cent — voted for a resolution during the company's annual meeting in Atlanta to pressure the iconic company to drop BPA, considered a toxic chemical by the Canadian government and already banned in baby bottles in Canada.

Other jurisdictions, including some American states, are working to extend the ban to tin cans.

Bisphenol A can leach into food and drinks from the protective epoxy resin coatings of canned foods or beverages and from such consumer products as polycarbonate tableware, plastic food storage containers and reusable hard plastic bottles.

Reproductive toxicity, including effects on fertility and development, has been identified as a key health effect of exposure to high concentrations of BPA, a recognized hormone-disrupting chemical.

Muhtar Kent, chairman and chief executive officer of The Coca-Cola Company, told shareholders that the science just isn't there to justify a shift away from BPA, saying if the company had any doubt "about the safety of our packaging, we would not continue to use it. It's that simple."

Kent said that this doesn't mean the company isn't exploring alternatives, but emphasized the beverage giant isn't in the packaging business and takes its direction from regulatory agencies.

The U.S. government's national toxicology program last year concluded it has "some concern for effects on the brain, behaviour and prostate gland in fetuses, infants and children at current human exposures to bisphenol A." But the U.S. regulator did not recommend any ban.

Shareholder advocate groups, saying it usually takes about 10 per cent of shareholders to sway companies to take action, blasted the company's response, but quickly added the vote represents a victory for consumer groups concerned about the health effects of BPA.

Last year, one in five (or 22 per cent) supported the proposal of Domini Social Investments, Trillium Asset Management Corp. and **As You Sow**.

"We went from one out of five shareholders to one out of four and Coke keeps ignoring the concern of a significant number of shareholders. That's a big jump," Michael Passoff, **As You Sow's** program director, said in an interview.

"We now represent one out of four, so clearly we're getting more support from shareholders and this is mainstream support," said Passoff, citing large institutional investors and a pension fund.

"They're not voting for environmental or health reasons. Scientists, government agencies and consumers are all raising concerns about this product, and Coke is not positioning itself for market change. That's a business decision, however you feel about BPA," said Passoff.

Rick Smith, who led the lobby campaign to ban BPA in baby bottles and is now calling on the Canadian government to



A logo is seen on a Coca-Cola bottle. Coke announced it will not stop the use of bisphenol A in can linings, despite protests from one quarter of its shareholders.

Photograph by: Christian Hartmann / Reuters, Christian Hartmann / Reuters

extend the ban to tin cans for food and drinks, said Coca-Cola is acting like a laggard.

"The best available science points to the fact that BPA from the lining of cans is one of our most important sources of exposure to this hormone-disrupting chemical. Governments around the world — most recently the (European Union) — have become concerned enough that they have banned BPA in baby bottles, and can linings will be next. The smart and proactive companies are already getting ahead of this curve, not stonewalling and denying the inevitable."