

Strengthening product safety

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's muscle has atrophied for 25 years. Its ability to protect the public from dangerous goods fell victim to budget cuts, staff reductions and blind faith that the free market would cure all ills.

Last week, that began to change. The Senate overwhelmingly approved a bill that would drastically increase the commission's budget over the next three years. It would establish a Web site to warn consumers about safety problems; give regulators better tools to enforce existing laws and hike the maximum fine for companies that knowingly flout safety laws.

The House passed a similar, but less expansive, bill in December. Differences between the two bills should be ironed out quickly and President George W. Bush should sign it immediately. Unlike the version passed by the Senate, the House bill doesn't grant "whistle-blower" protection to corporate insiders who come forward with evidence of corporate malfeasance. Congress has granted whistle-blower protections in four other laws enacted since 2002. Extending them here would help bring to light willful disregard of safety laws.

Another key difference is that the Senate bill allows state attorneys general to block distribution of unsafe products in their states. That works as a "force multiplier" for the undermanned CPSC, increasing enforcement, which protects consumers. It should be included in the final bill.

The product safety commission's problems have been decades in the making, but until last year there seemed little sense of urgency about resolving them. The CPSC has fewer than 400 employees and a budget of just \$63 million. That's less than half the workers and budget it had two decades ago (when adjusted for inflation). Yet the number of categories of products it regulates has grown to more than 15,000.

With so much responsibility and so small a staff - the department that tests toys consists of one person - it's no wonder the commission can't protect the public. It investigates just 10 to 15 percent of the reports it receives of product-related injuries or deaths.

Last year's seemingly unending parade of product recalls - pet food, tires, lead-painted toys and dangerous jewelry - was a long overdue wake-up call for Congress. Consumers expect and deserve to be protected from unsafe toys and dangerous products.

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