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New law aims to prevent antifreeze poisoning

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A new law takes effect Jan. 1 to prevent accidental poisonings of children, pets and wildlife in California.

The law, authored by Assemblyman Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, requires a bittering agent to be placed in antifreeze when it's sold in the state.

Antifreeze has a sweet taste and poisons scores of children and tens of thousands of pets and wildlife

every year. By adding a bittering agent, the bill is designed to improve consumer safety and reduce the number of accidental poisonings.

Cupertino resident Lauren Ward submitted the idea for the bill to Simitian, in response to his "There Oughta Be a Law" contest. Ward was inspired to do so after because of her family's recent loss a pet to antifreeze poisoning.

"I had contacted just about every local elected official I could think of



Joe Simitian

with no result," Ward said. "When I heard about Simitian's contest, I decided to give it one more chance.

"The jugs may look the same, but there will be one important difference."

I was impressed Joe called me himself to tell me he would be introducing my idea as a bill. This bill is an important step in making our environment safe for kids and animals."

Simitian said it's only costing "a few pennies per container" to add the bittering agent, which starting Jan. 1 will be put into every jug of antifreeze sold statewide.

"The jugs may look the same, but there will be one important difference," Simitian said.

California Poison Control

Services reported that in 2000, 66 children aged 12 and under were the victims of accidental poisonings from antifreeze ingestion.

According to Simitian's office, manufacturer Sierra Antifreeze also estimated that nationwide, 90,000 pets and animals die each year from ethylene-glycol based antifreeze.

Simitian's law was passed in 2002, but implementation was delayed one year to give antifreeze manufacturers and distributors to make the change.

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Dog dies from antifreeze, so woman gets bill passed

By ALLISON ROST

Assembly Bill 2474, which went into effect in California on Jan. 1, has a different name in Lauren Ward's household—Angus' Bill. Her family's six-month-old West Highland white terrier puppy, Angus, had to be euthanized in 2000 after suffering from antifreeze poisoning.

The Cupertino resident didn't let the death of her beloved pet fade into memory, however. After discovering that antifreeze has a sweet taste despite its toxicity, Ward contacted local politicians, looking to make a change. She finally entered her proposal into the "There Oughta Be a Law" contest sponsored by State Assemblyman Joe Simitian and won. Due to her actions, most antifreeze in the state must now carry a bittering agent—a bittersweet victory for Ward.

In 2000, Ward took Angus to the vet, where he licked a green stain in the parking lot. "I generally don't allow my dogs to move around, but it happened just in the time it took me to find my purse and shut the door," she says. Within hours, the puppy was sick, but days later, Angus was on dialysis and going blind in the care of a veterinarian at UC-Davis.

The family made the choice to euthanize the puppy, and when specialists listed the probable causes of Angus' condition, Ward could immediately pinpoint the culprit. "We tend to think of it in terms of big spills, but all it takes is a little drip," she says. Simitian's office quotes manufacturer Sierra Antifreeze, which estimated that 90,000 pets and animals die each year in

the United States from ethylene glycol-based antifreeze ingestion.

"I went online and looked up statistics, and I was aghast when I read things like [the fact that] a quarter of a teaspoon of antifreeze kills a cat," Ward says. "I couldn't believe there weren't regulations against something so poisonous." She began calling around to the offices of various elected officials, including then-Gov. Gray Davis.

Her only lead came when she spoke to Simitian's staff, who encouraged Ward to enter the assemblyman's inaugural "There Oughta Be a Law" contest in 2000. Anyone, even those outside Simitian's district, could enter with a suggestion for a new state law. Simitian reviews each entry, and those suggestions that won would be introduced as bills in the state assembly.

"Lauren had a very thorough package," Simitian says. "The bill had a lot to recommend it—it was a high-impact proposition that could save the lives of pets, wildlife and children." Simitian chose Ward's proposal also because it would have minimal financial impact on the state and because the state of Oregon has already implemented similar regulations for the past 10 years with proven effects.

"It has the potential to create a ripple effect in other states in the country if the program is successful in a state as large as California," Simitian says.

Originally, Ward's bill had a farther reach, but she discovered the reality of politics with her several trips to

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Photograph by Phil Wartena

Lauren Ward is responsible for getting a law passed that requires California antifreeze manufacturers to add a bitter taste to the lethal substance to protect dogs and children. Ward is at home here with daughter Rachelle and son Alex and their two dogs.

Bill: Antifreeze, Gatorade look the same

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Sacramento to support the legislation. "When I spoke in front of the assembly, I held up vials of Gatorade and antifreeze—they look the same," she says. Still, she couldn't persuade the assembly to ignore lobbyists because her original proposal required manufacturers to switch to the less toxic propylene glycol. "If there's an alternative, we should use it," Ward says.

The bill eventually passed, only requiring a bittering agent in antifreeze sold and used in California, with exemptions for 55-gallon barrels and out-of-state vehicles. It became law in 2002, but manufacturers were given a year to comply with the standards, hence the Jan. 1 date of effectiveness.

Such bureaucracy and politicking has

jaded Ward. "Now, I know how the government works, and it's somewhat self-defeating," she says. Ward still hopes to use the experience to push for further antifreeze controls as well as address problems with products that look similar. She says chemicals like Windex resemble consumables, but she's hoping not to be as easily deterred next time she pushes for a change. "You have to keep chipping away," she says.

Ward is a nurse by education, but currently serves as a stay-at-home mom to her two children, ages 8 and 11. Though they were younger when Angus died and they know their current dogs better, they still remember their puppy and the influence he's had. "We've talked about it, and now they're very aware of poisons, and the importance of fighting for something," Ward says.