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Environmentalists, marine flares manufacturer spar ahead of Newsom's veto deadline

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A California proposal would require that producers of emergency marine flares take responsibility over collecting expired and unwanted flares. | Mark Baker/AP

Environmental groups and the leading manufacturer of emergency marine flares are sparring over the impact of a bill on Gov. Gavin Newsom’s desk that would create a first-in-the-nation producer responsibility program for old flares.

What happened: Orion Safety Products — which sells approximately 55,000 flares in California each year and is the leading domestic supplier of emergency flares for marine use — is arguing that [SB 1066](#) by Sen. Catherine Blakespear would force it out of the California market. The bill would require the company to establish a program to collect expired and unwanted flares, which [contain toxic materials](#) and cannot be disposed of in the trash or waterways.

Heidi Sanborn, executive director of bill sponsor National Stewardship Action Council, said that if Orion leaves California, it would be absolving itself of its responsibility.

“Don’t tell me you care about boater safety,” Sanborn said. “If that’s what they do, shame on them, in my opinion.”

Blakespear said she had worked with Orion all year to resolve its concerns. “I am disappointed to hear Orion is still threatening to leave California,” she said in a statement. “I firmly believe this program is fair, affordable, and effective at protecting the environment.”

The bill passed the Legislature with bipartisan support. The governor’s office declined to

More context: Recreational boats more than 16 feet long must carry distress signals such as an emergency flare. The Department of Boating and Waterways [estimated that around](#) 174,000 flares, which have a lifespan of 42 months, expire each year, while Orion contends the figure is much lower and doesn't pose as much an environmental hazard.

Bob Defonte, vice president of sales and marketing at Orion, said the company would still sell LED light beacons in California, but would no longer sell flares — which meet U.S. Coast Guard requirements for both day and night use, unlike LEDs. Orion made around \$450,000 in sales in California in 2023 from emergency marine flares and around \$90,000 in profit, he said. The Assembly Appropriations Committee estimated that it would cost \$457,000 to develop a program to dispose of flares.

“You don't have to be a genius to figure out what you're going to do,” he said.

The National Marine Manufacturers Association and Recreational Boaters of California are also opposed to the measure.

Lobbying firepower: Orion brought on Winston Hickox, former secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency and a lobbyist with California Strategies, to lobby against the bill. In a Sept. 4 [letter to Newsom](#) requesting a veto, Hickox called for more reliable data and disputed defining expired flares as “hazardous waste.”

What's next: Newsom has until Sept. 30 to sign or veto legislation. Jim Lites, vice chair of California Strategies, said the opposition plans to meet with the Department of Finance next week to continue pleading its case.

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