

'Green' road to 'greener pastures' approved

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SACRAMENTO - By next summer, California residents could take a different path to the afterlife: "bio-cremation."

The state Assembly on Thursday unanimously approved an Inland lawmaker's bill that would legalize alkaline hydrolysis, a process that uses water, heat and alkaline solution to speed up the natural decomposition process.

Supporters call the process an environmentally friendly alternative to burial or incineration. Alkaline hydrolysis produces no air pollution and emits one-twentieth the level of heat-trapping greenhouse gases, proponents say.

"I'm excited that it just gives Californians an option on how they want to bury their loved ones," said the bill's author, Assemblyman [Jeff Miller](#), R-Corona.

If it passes the Senate and is signed by the governor, the law would take effect in July 2011 and make California one of just a handful of states where alkaline hydrolysis is legal.

The state's funeral industry is backing the bill, which came about after one of Miller's constituents asked him about changing the law. The legislation comes as many graveyards are running out of space.

"I thought, 'Wow, this could be a nice alternative.' It doesn't seem as violent as people think cremation is," said Chris Miller, who owns Thomas Miller Mortuary in Corona and Sierra Memorial Chapel in Riverside. "This doesn't create any sort of carbon footprint."

Chris Miller and Jeff Miller are not related.

There has been no opposition to the bill. Catholic groups in some states have objected to the process, but the California [Catholic Conference](#) does not expect to take a position, a spokeswoman said Thursday.

Environmental organizations likewise have not weighed in. In recent years, some have raised concerns about mercury from tooth fillings released into the air by cremation.

Several medical facilities and laboratories have used alkaline hydrolysis for teaching, cadavers and animals.

HARDLY AVAILABLE YET

Only four states, Oregon, Minnesota, Florida and Maine, allow bio-cremation for the public, according to Matthews Cremation, a Florida company that backs the California bill. Yet the process remains virtually unavailable in the U.S.

"You're looking at a machine that costs a quarter- to a half-million dollars," said Mark Stehn, executive director of the Oregon Funeral Directors Association, which supported last year's legislation that allows the process in Oregon. None of the state's roughly 300 funeral homes offer the service yet, he said.

"It's probably not something for everybody," Stehn said. "But I don't know if anyone thought 20 years ago that cremation would be as prevalent as it is now."

The process involves a machine filled with a water and alkaline solution to dissolve the soft tissues of the body, leaving only bone particles behind.

The body is placed in a mesh basket or tray inside the machine, and the solution -- usually potassium hydroxide and water -- is heated to about 330 to 370 degrees Fahrenheit, said Jessica Koth, spokeswoman for the National Funeral Directors Association, a group that represents about 10,000 funeral homes.

When sprayed with the alkaline solution, the body rapidly breaks down. It's like a sped-

up version of natural decomposition, so "it only takes a three- to six-hour period instead of it taking hundreds of years," said Chris Miller.

Miller said he heard through funeral industry groups he belongs to that alkaline hydrolysis has been used in Europe for several years, and he wanted to bring it here.

Proponents claim it leaves no harmful byproducts. Koth said the companies that make alkaline hydrolysis machines say the solution is safe to put in the sewer system.

Unlike the cremation process, alkaline hydrolysis doesn't damage pacemakers and prosthetics, so they could be used again, Chris Miller said. Even the bone particles come out of the machine snowy white rather than charred gray, he said.

Customers haven't been asking Chris Miller about alkaline hydrolysis, because the process is simply too new and they haven't heard of it, he said.

But Chris Miller expects interest in the process to grow as it becomes available. Cremation already was the choice of 36 percent of U.S. consumers in 2008, the most recent year Koth had statistics for. The rest chose some type of burial. In California the cremation rate was even higher -- 47.27 percent.

CREMATION COSTS

A basic cremation runs from about \$700 to more than \$1,000. One unknown is what alkaline hydrolysis will cost. Although the process is cheaper per person than cremation, funeral homes will have to recoup the cost of the machines.

Chris Miller said he hasn't calculated what he might charge if he buys a machine, he said, adding, "It's going to cost the consumer more, but it seems like everything that's green costs more."

Jeff Miller is a conservative **Republican** who often votes against environmental proposals. Thursday, however, he touted his bill's environmental credentials.

"Going green is not just a way of life," he deadpanned, as colleagues chortled.

For Miller, though, his bill likely will be the closest he ever gets to alkaline hydrolysis. Miller is Jewish, a religion that requires burial.

"I would say that at this time in my life that's my choice," Miller said.

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