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Phosphate ban begins and could help stop algae in Michigan waters

Phosphate-free detergent can curb growth

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How clean will your dishes be after today?

A ban on phosphates, the hardworking but troublesome main ingredient in most automatic dishwasher detergents, takes effect in Michigan and 15 other states today.

- **REPORT:** <http://www.greenerchoices.org/ratings.cfm?product=greencleaning>">Consumer Reports' rankings of dishwasher detergents
- **RELATED CONTENT:** <http://www.freep.com/article/20100701/NEWS05/7010389/1319/>">New detergent falls short for some buyers

Phosphates may get rid of grease, prevent spotting and keep food from being redeposited during the wash cycle, but they also end up in rivers and lakes, where they feed mucky algae blooms and contribute to dead zones that rob fish and plants of oxygen.

Phosphate-free products already are on most store shelves in Michigan this week, and a few have been around for years. But not everyone loves them.

After the first such ban took effect in 2008 in Spokane County, Wash., unhappy dish-doers drove to neighboring Idaho to stock up on soap with phosphates.

The ingredient wasn't easy to replace in the phosphate-free detergents, but the industry has come up with new formulas, said Dennis Griesing, vice president of government affairs for the American Cleaning Institute.

"If consumers are dissatisfied, we'll know in a few months."

Ban to battle algae blooms

Macomb County Water Quality Board Chairman Doug Martz has seen his share of ugly algae blooms.

One he remembers vividly was a few Augusts ago in Lake St. Clair, near the mouth of the Clinton River.

"It looked like cauliflower growing on reddish-brown Astroturf" -- an impenetrable mat on the water's surface, he said. It was so bad, he took people to see it.

Starting today, one ingredient of that nasty scum will disappear: Phosphates in automatic dishwashing detergents are banned and have already been replaced on most grocery store shelves with

phosphate-free versions.

"That's absolutely, positively fantastic," Martz said.

Michigan passed its ban in December 2008; 15 other states passed bans between 2006 and 2009. But manufacturers convinced each state to hold off on making the bans effective until this week to give them time to reformulate their products.

Manufacturers decided to roll out phosphate-free product lines everywhere in the U.S. and Canada, said Dennis Griesing, vice president of government affairs for the American Cleaning Institute, the trade association for the detergent industry.

"It's inefficient to produce different variations of products for different states," he said.

Phosphates, derived from the nutrient phosphorus, are the main cleaning agent in many detergents and household cleaners. They break down grease, remove stains and help break up hard water molecules to make cleaning easier.

But they end up in septic systems and wastewater treatment plants and eventually in rivers and lakes, where they feed algae blooms. Decaying algae robs oxygen from fish and aquatic life, creating dead zones in lakes. Some algae blooms have led to large fish kills in west Michigan.

Phosphates were banned nationwide from laundry detergent by the early 1990s, and they have never been used in hand-washing liquids for dishes, since those liquids rely on scrubbing friction from hands and sponges to clean dishes, Griesing said.

"You don't have that in machines, it's all spray jets," he said. "That's why you need a different chemistry in automatic dishwashers."

Eighty percent of dishwasher detergent sales have, until now, come from companies with phosphate products, Griesing said.

The new law is targeted at sellers of detergent, not buyers, so those with phosphate soaps under their sinks won't be in trouble.

The switchover should be complete by today at stores.

"When these bans happen, the manufacturers tend to be very proactive," said Frank Guglielmi, a spokesman for Meijer.

While environmental groups and water-quality watchers are pleased, they say the new rule won't end algae, since detergents are only one of many sources of phosphorus.

Other sources include agricultural runoff, phosphates in fertilizer, industrial cleaners, food processing and wastewater treatment plants.

State Sen. Patty Birkholz, R-Saugatuck, a sponsor of the Michigan ban, said the ban won't help overnight, but "eventually, we will definitely see a difference."

A ban on phosphates in fertilizer for lawns and golf courses is on the House floor in Michigan. Several counties and cities have already banned phosphate fertilizers unless homeowners can show their soil lacks phosphorus.

The state ban would exempt farmers, who argue that they need to add phosphorus to help crops grow.

U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., is a sponsor of a federal ban on phosphates in fertilizer. Many stores now offer phosphate-free, as well as phosphate, fertilizers.

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A look at the ban

The phosphate ban that takes effect today is for household automatic dishwashing detergent. Nationwide, about 74% of homes have dishwashers.

It exempts commercial dishwashing detergents used in restaurants, hospitals and institutional dishwashers, which use higher temperatures, making it tougher to come up with substitutes for phosphates, according to the industry.

The law bans the sale of detergents with more than 0.5% phosphates by weight. The old limit was 8.7%.

Laundry detergent is already phosphate-free because of a previous ban, and hand dishwashing liquids never had them.

Some Michigan legislators have proposed a ban on phosphates in fertilizer, which a few states and a number of counties in Michigan -- including Bay, Ottaway and Allegan -- have already done. A federal ban is under consideration in Congress.
