

# Proposed ban on phosphate detergent could be costly to area consumers

Thousands of people in Perquimans County may have to pay more to do their weekly wash, and without the same satisfactory results they get now, if a proposed law is passed in the legislative session which gets underway June 7, according to the people who make laundry products.

The Department of Natural Resources and Community Development (NRCD) wants to remove from North Carolina shelves all laundry detergents containing phosphorus, also called phosphate—the very ingredient that for nearly 40 years has been getting clothes cleaner, says The Soap and Detergent Association (SDA).

The NRCD claims that detergent phosphorus, which is a non-toxic nutrient, contributes to the growth of blue-green algae in several streams in the eastern part of the state; however, water quality scientists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, among others, say that the removal of this small amount of phosphorus would have no noticeable effect on these bodies of water.

Phosphorus performs several important cleaning functions, says Dr. Keith Booman, research director of the SDA. "It ties up minerals—calcium, magnesium, iron—in the washwater, it helps break up dirt on fabrics and keeps it from settling back on the clothes, and it provides the proper alkalinity for cleaning. It is the single most effective agent for this purpose that the industry has developed. And it is non-toxic."

Should the ban pass, manufacturers likely would turn to the use of an old ingredient, sodium carbonate, according to Mildred Gallik, the SDA's director of consumer affairs and a graduate home economist. "Based on experience in other areas that have tried bans, many consumers find that it does not remove dirt as effectively as phosphate, and it may leave dangling deposits of minerals on clothing and machine parts."

According to Gallik, sodium carbonate also provides far less protection against brown stains on clothes, caused by iron, which is present in substantial amounts in most of the water in this state.

"A detergent ban would be unfair to more than two million people in North Carolina who use well water which is hard and usually has an iron high content," she says. "These are working people—farmers, mechanics, and laborers of all types—who get their clothes dirty and need the cleaning power of the heavy-duty detergents which contain phosphorus. In addition, these people deposit their household waste into septic tanks and not into municipal treatment systems, so they do not contribute to phosphorus levels in bodies of water."

In Perquimans County, some 2,440 (28 percent of the population) depend on private wells for their water supply. Documented studies reveal that if these consumers do not use phosphate detergents, they might

have to spend an extra \$9 a year per person to wash clothes...or about \$24-\$25 a family. This means that in this county alone the people who use well water would spend an estimated total of \$21,960 additional a year on laundering, in the form of more hot water, electricity, cleaning additives, and damage to clothes and washing machine parts.

Statewide, an estimated 2,145,000 people use well water, a whopping one-third of the population, who would have to shell out an additional estimated \$19 million if there is a ban on phosphate detergents.

The people of North Carolina already spend about \$300 million a year doing laundry.

Robert C. Singer, vice-president of the SDA, summarized the position of the association this way: "We oppose the ban because it would unfairly penalize consumers all across the state in an effort to focus on a few lakes in the eastern part. We know from research and experience that removing the small amount of phosphate from laundry detergents will have no real effect on the growth of blue-green algae."

"Stores now carry detergents with and without phosphate so people already have a choice. A ban would deprive them of this choice, and would force many thousands of consumers to use a product with which they may be dissatisfied."

"The only effective way to reduce

the level of phosphorus in streams which have a problem is to stop or dramatically reduce urban and agricultural runoff, and to use chemical treatment in municipal wastewater plants. Hundreds of plants in this country are using chemical treatment, so we know that up to 90 percent of phosphorus as well as other unwanted elements can be removed from the water at low cost. A detergent ban would eliminate only to 15 percent of the total phosphorus, depending on the stream, not enough to make any difference.

"The chemical approach to waste treatment is also the fair way, since only those communities that have a

problem would bear the cost."

"We hope," continued Singer, "that the voters in Perquimans County will let their state legislators know right away that a ban should not be passed in haste, particularly when there is no statewide problem, and that more time should be spent looking into the most effective ways to protect North Carolina waters."

What are the areas of concern? Algae has been a periodic problem along the lower Neuse and Chowan Rivers. There is some concern for two new reservoirs, although there is admittedly no problem now—Falls Lake between Durham and Raleigh, and Jordan Lake, south of Chapel

Hill.

In a recent editorial (4-14-84), the "Sun-Journal" of New Bern said: "If a ban reaches enactment, those of us who are genuinely concerned about polluted streams—especially the Neuse River—will have lost heavily."

"Two facts need to be kept in mind in discussing such a ban: (1) phosphorus apparently is not a pollutant nor a significant contributor to pollution, at least in the Neuse; (2) most phosphate that go into the state's waters come from sources other than detergents—only

about 10 to 15 percent could be stopped by a phosphate detergent ban."

"In sum, phosphorus is not a problem in the Neuse River and even if it were a problem a detergent ban would do very little to help."

"Sadly, the phosphate detergent ban may well give the appearance of positive action. In reality, it will merely raise the cost of doing laundry...Certainly the river does not need and may not survive much more of the state's take-charge, then do-nothing attitude."

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**TURKEY WINGS**  
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**69¢**



**BOUNTY TOWELS**  
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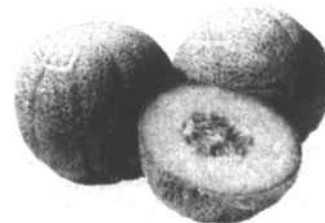
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