

Palmolive detergent follows environmental law

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Spokesman Review
June 4, 2008

A strict new environmental law that was fought by the soap industry may be the best thing that's ever happened to Palmolive's dishwasher detergent.

By the end of the month, Palmolive Eco liquid detergent will dominate store shelves because the company beat all major producers to market with a product that complies with a July 1 restriction sharply limiting the use of phosphates in detergents.

"They're taking the step to make their product more environmentally friendly," said Rick Eichstaedt, an attorney active in efforts to improve water quality in the Spokane River. "They should be applauded for doing that."

Still, the ban, which industry officials say is the strictest in the nation, will eliminate low-cost options and the most popular brands. Gone from Spokane County shelves will be Cascade, Electrasol and Sun Light until those brands comply with the law. Distributors say they haven't been given an indication when that might happen.

With options limited, consumers likely will pay higher prices. At Rosauers on 29th Avenue on Sunday, a 75-ounce bottle of Palmolive Eco cost \$5.59. That's the same price as the older version of Palmolive but more than 75-ounce bottles of Electrasol, which was selling for \$4.99, and Western Family, which cost \$4.29.

Spokane County Commissioner Todd Mielke said the rules are essential to help meet federal clean water standards. "I believe that over time those prices will go down as more competition enters the market," he said.

The new restrictions were pushed by local leaders hoping to comply with proposed state phosphorus pollution rules that would be the strictest in the nation. Phosphates flowing into the Spokane River encourage large blooms of plant life in Lake Spokane, which in turn reduce oxygen in the water and damage fish populations.

URM, a grocery distribution company that owns Rosauers, will stop delivering detergents with phosphates on July 16, said URM President and CEO Dean Sonnenberg. The new Palmolive product, made by Colgate-Palmolive Co., is available in many county stores. Jon Roman, URM's director of procurement, said Palmolive had accounted for about 3 percent of the dishwasher detergent distributed by URM. That number likely will soar above 90 percent in Spokane County after the ban becomes effective.

URM has offered stores 25 dishwasher detergent products, and that number in Spokane County will fall to five – four of them Palmolive. The other product is Seventh Generation.

Seventh Generation has been phosphate-free and on grocery shelves long before any ban. The law, however, likely will sharply increase its shelf visibility. Because all of Palmolive's new products are liquid, Seventh Generation is likely to become the leading powder detergent choice at many grocery stores.

Rosauers' price for a 45-ounce box of Seventh Generation was \$5.19 on Sunday. That compares with \$3.49 for Cascade and \$2.79 for Western Family.

The July 1 deadline was created for Spokane, Whatcom and Clark counties by the state Legislature in 2006. The whole state will have to follow the requirement starting in 2010.

Earlier this year, Gov. Chris Gregoire signed a bill that removed Clark County from having to meet the early deadline and to allow Whatcom County stores to continue selling detergent tablets with phosphates.

Spokane County rules remained unchanged. Critics of the amendments, such as county commissioners, argued that removing Clark County from the early ban put less pressure on major manufacturers to produce products that comply.

Industry officials argued that dishwasher detergent without phosphates would be less effective.

Since the law was passed, however, the Washington, D.C.-based Soap and Detergent Association has said manufacturers are preparing to comply with the statewide ban in 2010.

A 2005 Consumer Reports study on dishwasher detergents indicates that some phosphate-free options are as effective as traditional options. The study rated Trader Joe's powder detergent, which is phosphate-free, as the second best soap of 20 tested. Two other phosphate-free brands, Seventh Generation powder and Ecover powder, also were rated "excellent."

The dish phosphate rule comes almost 20 years after a similar ban for laundry detergents.

A large algae bloom in Lake Spokane in 1989 led the city of Spokane and several other communities in the county and North Idaho to restrict phosphates in laundry soaps, according to previous Spokesman-Review articles. The new ban likely will be more noticeable to consumers. That's because the laundry phosphate ban occurred after similar laws were in effect in about 30 percent of the United States and many big brands already were producing phosphate-free options.

Dale Arnold, Spokane's wastewater management director, said that after the laundry ban the amount of phosphorus flowing into Spokane's wastewater treatment plant fell from about seven milligrams a liter to six – a substantial drop.

He added he believes the new rules will help, but may not be as noticeable.

The state Department of Ecology is finishing new standards for the Spokane River that set levels of phosphorus to the amount that would occur naturally.

Spokane and other sewage dischargers are spending millions of dollars in technology improvements to meet the requirements.

Mielke said the law will help prevent building moratoriums in places like Spokane County that are nearing capacity in sewage systems but won't be able to get permits to discharge more unless they find ways to reduce phosphorus.

Arnold said Spokane's new permit likely will limit its phosphorus discharge from 750 parts per billion to less than 10 parts per billion. The ban on phosphates should help the sewage plant comply with upcoming state regulations, he said.

"It creates a situation where you can use less chemical or the chemical you do use is more effective in removing a greater amount of phosphorus," Arnold said.

Spokesman-Review

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