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Letter from Robert A. Sweeney, Director, Great Lakes Laboratory*

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THE ROCHESTER COMMITTEE FOR SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION
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Bulletin #156
Water Pollution

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Letter from Robert A Sweeney
Director, Great Lakes Laboratory*

Introduction

Dr. Robert A. Sweeney, Director of the Great Lakes Laboratory, State University College at Buffalo, supports the New York State law banning phosphate compounds from laundry detergents. Dr. Sweeney backs the Commissioner's position that the 8.7% phosphorus limit for dishwashing detergents should be extended. The same thing should apply to cleaning products associated with raw food processing machinery; specifically dairy equipment. This bulletin consists of excerpts from Dr. Sweeney's letter to the R.C.S.I. R.C.S.I. members who wish to get more information on this topic are referred to R.C.S.I. bulletin Nos. 118, 150, and 151 (when published).

The Letter

Environmental Conservation Commissioner Henry Diamond, when he recommended the implementation of Phase II of the phosphate detergent legislation - namely, the elimination of phosphates from laundry detergents sold in New York State by 1 June 1973 - on 13 February 1973 warned that considerable efforts were afoot to derail this critical ban. As a native New Yorker and professional limnologist, who for more than a decade has studied the accelerated aging of our lakes and rivers, I strongly concur with the views of Mr. Diamond and his staff. On the other hand, as an educator, I am appalled by the tactics being employed by those opposing the ban. Specifically, they are disseminating half-truths and using scare tactics.

The opposition to the ban is being led by a consortium of phosphate manufacturers whose major spokesperson is Ms. Judith Smeltzer of FMC (Corporation). Another individual deeply involved is Dr. Mary Purchase of the College of Human Ecology (Home Economics) at the State University of New York at Cornell.

They have stated or inferred the following: (a) Reducing the phosphate content of detergents has not improved the quality of lakes and streams; (b) Non-phosphate detergents are less safe than phosphate detergents; (c) Non-phosphate detergents inhibit flame-retarding chemicals, particularly those used on children's sleepwear... Each of these generalizations is untrue.

An EPA-sponsored study has shown that stream quality in Erie County has improved more than 40% since the sale of phosphate detergents was banned on 1 January 1972. (During this period, there was no upgrading of sewage treatment plants or correction of combined storm-sanitary sewer problems.)

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The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) rated more than fifty (50) phosphate and non-phosphate detergents on their degree of hazard to humans. They gave the most hazardous a rating of 3; the least 0.....The average and range for both the phosphate and phosphate-free products was the same.....Dr. Edwards, Head of the FDA, concluded that their degree of hazard was not related to phosphate content. In doing so, he strongly disagreed with Dr. Jessie Steinfeld, the former Surgeon General, who had recommended the use of phosphate detergents on 15 September 1971. Dr. Steinfeld has since stated that his remarks had been taken out of context. Non-phosphates have not resulted in any health problems or deaths, which have been implied by the pro-phosphate forces. The cause of death of a child in Connecticut, who swallowed a non-phosphate detergent, was due to asphyxiation, not related to the chemical formulation of the product involved. Unfortunately, four (4) to five (5) youngsters die each year in a similar fashion from swallowing talcum powder, an inert substance..... A careful monitoring of hospitals and dermatologists in Erie County by the FDA and Health Department has shown no increase in rashes, etc. since the phosphate ban was implemented. Similar observations have been made in other regions with phosphate bans, including Dade County, Florida and Chicago.

Some non-phosphate detergents do inhibit flame-retarding chemicals used in some fabrics.....However, others - specifically citrate-based products* - do not..... Tests by U.S. Department of Agriculture also show that there are few problems with the flame retardants used on synthetics irregardless of the nature of the detergents in which they are washed.

Phosphate substitutes cause no increased problems at sewage treatment plants or in receiving bodies of water.....There has been no problem in the availability of non-phosphates or soaps in areas where phosphates have been banned.

Neither my staff, laboratory at the State University College at Buffalo nor I have ever received any financial support from any detergent, soap, phosphate or phosphate substitute manufacturer. Our research on this issue has been supported by federal agencies. My major concern is that all the facts on the phosphate/non-phosphate detergent issue are aired. In New York State, currently this is not being done by many of those favoring phosphates.

I urge that you and your group study the issues, and make your opinion known, as soon as possible, to the Legislature. Mail is still the major consideration in determining which way our elected officials vote.

Respectfully,

Robert A. Sweeney, Director
Great Lakes Laboratory

* For instance, Wisk (R.C.S.I. note)