



News Release

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Ecology offers tips for “Soap Smugglers’ Blues” New dish soaps can reduce phosphate choking of Spokane River

SPOKANE – While some may be “smuggling” into Spokane County the phosphate-laden automatic dishwashing soaps of the past, the Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) reports that the 10-month-old ban on high-phosphate dishwasher detergents is beginning to pay off for the Spokane River.

And the agency is offering consumer tips for local residents who are having difficulty with the transition to the newer phosphate-free dishwasher detergents.

The ban on the sale of high-phosphate detergents was enacted by the state Legislature and went into effect in Spokane and Whatcom counties in July 2008, to reduce the amount of phosphorus choking local streams and rivers.

Since then, grocery shelves have been stocked with a growing variety of –phosphate-free automatic dishwashing detergents.

“The city of Spokane is already seeing signs of improvement in the amount of phosphorus that comes into the city’s wastewater treatment plant,” said Jim Bellatty who manages Ecology’s water quality office in Spokane.

Some feel phosphate-free soaps do not work as well as their old detergents, and they may be right, especially in Spokane, where the water is “hardened” by minerals.

“We hear you,” said Ecology Director Jay Manning. “While manufacturers are working to increase the quality and effectiveness of phosphate-free detergents on the market, we want to thank those Spokane-area residents who are complying with the new law and going the extra mile to protect the Spokane River from algae blooms and fish kills.”

Here are some tips for those who are having trouble getting their dishes clean.

- Check Consumer Reports’ product ranking:
<http://www.greenerchoices.org/ratings.cfm?product=greencleaning>. Choose a phosphorus-free soap that ranked well.
- Choose products with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Design for the Environment certification (<http://www.epa.gov/dfe/pubs/projects/formulat/label.htm>)

- Spokane has hard water. That means it has a high concentration of minerals. Hardness in water causes it to form scales and makes it resistant to soap. Choose a brand that contains some form of salt to help soften the water and allow the soap to grab grease and food particles more easily. Look for sodium bicarbonate (baking soda). Or you can add washing soda purchased from the laundry aisle at your grocery store.
- Some brands work better than others. Talk with neighbors, friends and nearby family members about what brands are working for them.
- Some manufacturers recommend using a rinse aid to help soften the water and reduce spotting. Distilled white vinegar also can work as an inexpensive alternative to commercial rinse aids.

Why phosphate-free dish detergents matter

One pound of phosphorus can grow 700 pounds of algae. When a lake contains too much phosphorus or other nutrient pollution, algae and other water plants thrive. The pollution acts like fertilizer, stimulating the growth of aquatic plants. When these plants decompose, they use up the oxygen in the water. There's too much nutrient pollution in the Spokane River and Lake Spokane – meaning too little oxygen to support a healthy a healthy fish population.

The existing treatment plants along the Spokane River can remove a great deal of the phosphorus in the water. But in order to comply with the state standard for phosphorus, more has to be removed.

“The easiest way to remove phosphorus from the wastewater is to not put it in to begin with,” said Bellatty. One way to accomplish this is to stop using high-phosphorus dishwashing soap.

“Getting phosphorus out of the Spokane River and Lake Spokane is a major community issue, and it's up to us all to help,” Bellatty said. “It's not only the responsibility of the municipalities and industries that discharge into the river.”

Other things people can do to reduce phosphorus to the river and Lake Spokane include:

- Properly disposing domestic pet waste in the trash,
- Fencing animals out of the creek on small farms or covering the waste,
- Using only natural, low phosphate fertilizers and pesticides on lawns and gardens, and
- Inspecting septic tanks regularly and having them pumped out at regular intervals.

For additional information, visit Ecology's web site at: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/> and click on “Phosphates and dishwashing” on the right hand side under “Spotlight.”

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For more information:

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/nonpoint/phosphorus/PhosphorusBan.html>

Ecology's Web site: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov>