

How phosphates ban affects Great Lakes water

By ED BAS and SUSAN TAUBER KLEIN

On Oct. 1, the Michigan Natural Resources Commission, an environmental protection branch of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) ordered a ban on phosphates in all household detergents. Retailers and wholesalers can no longer order any household detergents containing phosphates because of the ruling.

The effect on Michigan consumers is two-fold.

The long-range benefit of the ban will be cleaner water in the five Great Lakes, particularly Lake Erie, the closest Great Lake to metropolitan Detroit.

The immediate effect to consumers will be clothes that are harder to clean with detergents that contain only one-half per cent phosphates as compared to amounts ranging as high as 13 per cent.

According to Gay Cowels, public information specialist for the DNR, the decision to ban phosphates resulted from scientific information that showed they contribute to the deterioration of the lakes.

"Phosphates accelerate the aging process of the lakes," Mrs. Cowels said. "This means the lakes fill up with plants and algae that remove oxygen from the water, which is bad for the fish. These plants decay and fertilize new plants and the aging process continues."

BUT BANNING phosphates from household detergents isn't going to be the answer to cleaning up the Great Lakes, according to Mrs. Cowels. Phosphates will continue to get into the water from sewage treatment plants and from agricultural run-offs, because the nutrient is in fertilizer.

There is a DNR ruling requiring removal of phosphates from sewage treatment plants but this removal will take time, Mrs. Cowels added. She said sewage plants aren't built or updated fast enough.

Changes to Rochester's own sewage treatment plant also will require phosphate removal, according to City Mgr. William Sinclair. Rochester and Pontiac are the only two communities in southeastern Michigan with their own municipal sewage treatment plants.

Avon Township and other suburban customers of the Detroit sewage treatment system are involved in a federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) lawsuit versus the city of Detroit. Detroit will begin cleaning up its treatment program to meet federal pollution standards. Estimates on the cost of upgrading the system range from \$70 million to \$350 million.

Updating and upgrading both the Detroit system and Rochester's own plant will be necessary to remove phosphates.

REMOVING THE phosphates from sewage will create new problems, according to Rochester City Mgr. Wil-

liam Sinclair, including removing added sludge created by chemical removal of the phosphates. And if old required percentages of phosphate removal are kept after the detergent ban, it will be harder to remove those percentages, according to Sinclair.

Some supermarket shelves as of last week had an equal supply of phosphate and phosphate-free detergents while some supermarkets only had detergents with phosphates. The consumer can shop for phosphate-free or low-phosphate detergent by reading the lower side panels of the container. Phosphate content is identified in both percentages and grams.

"Biodegradable" is a term also found on most containers of soap and laundry products, which means the substance is broken down relatively quickly by the environment. This is to prevent sucking and foam after the soap has entered lakes and streams. However, the breaking down action gives rise to more and more micro-organisms and more aquatic growth such as algae.

But according to Mike Stifler of the Michigan DNR water quality division, the phosphate ban will decrease much of the algae growth.

"The effects of the detergent phosphate ban could be seen in Lake Erie as early as the first of the year," Stifler said.

Although environmentalists consider this ruling a victory, the Soap and Detergent Association representatives aren't happy.

"CONSUMERS WILL pay more and won't be as satisfied with their laundry," said Bob Singer, vice-president of the association that represents 90 per cent of all soaps and detergents produced in the U.S.

"Powdered detergents won't be as effective. They won't cost more, but laundries will be using more detergent, doing more washes, and will be using more additives, bleaches, water and energy."

"Whirlpool representatives recently testified that there were more frequent service calls on washing machines in the states banning phosphates because of the buildup up carbonate materials," Singer said. The states with the phosphate ban are New York, Indiana and Minnesota. Chicago has its own ban.

Singer explained that soap or carbonates tie up hard minerals such as iron, magnesium and calcium. Instead of being taken out of the washing machine in the laundry water, they dropped back into the machine. Phosphates keep the minerals in the water solution and carried them out of the machine with the rinse water.

Phosphates don't actually act as a cleaning agent, according to Stifler, but rid clothes and washing machines of soap residues.

"Most powders will simply replace the phosphates with sodium carbonate or common soda ash. The liquids won't replace them with anything, except maybe sodium citrate or others known as surfactants." Surfactants break the

water tension and allow the cleaning agent to get to the dirt in the laundry.

STIFLER SAID as much as 15 to 20 per cent of the phosphate in Lake Erie is from detergents while the detergent industry claims the figure is less than 10 per cent.

Although commercial laundries including nursing homes aren't regulated by the ban, Stifler said he would encourage them to abide by the new ruling. He explained they were exempt because the ban "might not have passed otherwise."

Household detergents were regulated because 80 per cent of all phosphate-detergent users are household laundries, according to Stifler.

Paul Tomboulis, head of the chemistry department at Oakland University and head of a team of student water testers, said, "There's no question the ban is a step in the right direction."

He attributed much of the pollution problem in the Rochester area, including Paint Creek, to human waste that won't be affected by either the phosphate ban or the EPA suit.

If the Soap and Detergent Association has its way, the ban may be ruled invalid. The association has a court case in Wayne County Circuit Court that is questioning the procedural rights of the DNR to give the Water Resource Commission (WRC) the right to regulate detergent in Michigan.

According to Singer, the original leg-

islation regulating the amount of phosphate in detergent to 8.7 per cent also gave the WRC the right to regulate detergent.

In 1973, WRC transferred this regulatory position to NRC. The ruling power was given back to WRC in a hearing in 1976 and it was the NRC, not the WRC, that promulgated the rule banning phosphates.

"We are challenging the legal right of the Michigan governor to transfer powers," Singer said. "Only the legislature can do this. We've asked for a temporary injunction. There will be a main court trial and when this goes in and we win, the ban will be invalid."

The court case was tried and refused in Wayne County Circuit Court and Appeals Court. The court case will be heard again in the circuit court. No date has been set.

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Region leads in know-how of labor force

When it comes to an educated and skilled labor force, knowledgeable about industry, the Great Lakes states are above the national average, says a Michigan State University manpower specialist.

According to Dr. Daniel H. Kruger, professor of labor and industrial relations, 21.4 per cent of the nation's civilian labor force in 1976 was concentrated in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin.

All but Minnesota had a higher proportion of its employed work force in blue collar occupations than did the nation as whole.

"The importance of the region as a manufacturing center," Kruger stated, "is reflected in the proportion of craft workers in the labor force of these six states."

These ranged from 13.3 per cent in craft occupations in Minnesota to 14.8 per cent in Indiana. On the national level, 12.9 per cent of the labor force was classified as craftsmen.

"The high proportion of skilled workers in the region is an important factor for manufacturing activity," Kruger added.

Five of the six Great Lakes states also had a higher proportion of semi-skilled workers than the national average. Minnesota, at 9.5 per cent, was less than the national figure of 11.4 per cent.

Illiteracy in the Great Lakes states in 1970 ranged from 6 per cent in Minnesota to 3 per cent in Illinois and Michigan. The national average was 12 per cent illiterates in the population 14 years and older.

In addition, the Great Lakes states had a higher proportion of high school graduates than the total U.S. population, Kruger noted.

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