

Smuggling Soap Across the Stateline – by Jordy Byrd, Lands Council Volunteer

Spokane's dishwashers have become a household name. People as far as The Los Angeles Times, ABC News, The Chicago Tribune and the BBC have read all the intimate details about what soap Spokanites are using, how their getting it, and who's smuggling it across borders. But what's all the fuss about?

“The smuggler stories appeal to people because you have a classic story line,” said Cathy Cochrane, communications manager with the Washington Department of Ecology, Eastern Region. “It's the smuggler mom pitted against big government.” In most cases, the smuggler mom is a Spokane resident wanting to keep her dishes clean. The big government, well that's Washington State's Legislature.

Since passing a ban which decreases the amount of phosphates in dishwashing detergents, Spokane has seen a tidal wave of national media attention. Thus far, the attention has focused on the smugglers – people crossing into Idaho to purchase phosphate rich detergent. Less attention however, has focused on the ban itself.

Phosphate ban

Phosphorus is used in dishwashing detergent to reduce mineral levels and prevent food particles from depositing on dishes. It get's the job done, even with Spokane's hard water, but what it's also doing is polluting the Spokane River.

Phosphorous is a pollutant that acts as a fertilizer which stimulates the growth of algae and other aquatic plants, said Mike Petersen, executive director with The Lands Council.

According the Washington State Department of Ecology, one pound of phosphorus can grow 700 pounds of algae. In turn, the plants use up the oxygen in the water and make it difficult to support a healthy fish population, Petersen said.

Because of this, phosphates have been banned in laundry detergent nationally since 1993. “Logically the next target was dishwashing soap,” Petersen said. “Spokane has been working to decrease the amount of phosphorus in our river and one of the easy things to target is the products that we use.”

Pioneering the ban

Cochrane and Petersen said Spokane's received national attention because the city is pioneering the phosphate ban. Washington State adopted the first national phosphate ban in July, 2008 in Spokane, Clark and Whatcom counties. Washington's ban will be extended statewide by July 2010.

Following suite, other states are imposing phosphate restrictions. The Soap and Detergent Association backed legislation in Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Utah, Vermont and Virginia, and Washington; all of

which pledge to reduce the use of phosphates to 0.5 percent by July, 2010. Currently, most states allow up to 9 percent phosphorus in their dishwashing detergents.

Every action counts

Petersen and Cochrane agree that media attention – whether good or bad – is beneficial to the community. “All this national attention is good because it makes people think about the issue and the actions of other people,” Petersen said. “Hopefully other people are thinking, wow that’s stupid to smuggle a pollutant into our community.”

Cochrane said it’s too bad the smugglers don’t see that each person has the ability to be part of the solution or part of the problem. “The Department of Ecology and I’m sure The Lands Council would like people to understand that their individual actions do make a difference.”

For more information on phosphate low soaps or how to decrease your use of phosphates visit: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/news/2009news/2009-083.html>