

DO SOMETHING!

DO SOMETHING! FACT SHEET PHOSPHATES IN LAUNDRY DETERGENTS

Back in the late eighties and early nineties, the issue of blue green algae in waterways was a hot environmental topic. Driven by environmental groups and extensively reported by the media, the issue generated significant international coverage.

Phosphate was identified as a contributor to the problem and as a result, American environment groups led a high-profile campaign to eliminate the ingredient from household cleaning products. Their campaign received a major boost when numerous States moved to formally limit or restrict phosphates in laundry detergents.¹

The pressure on the industry was immense and by the mid-nineties, America's detergent companies had voluntarily phased out phosphate in all domestic formulations. It was a big win for the environment. America's household laundry detergents had become phosphate-free.

Australia had good reason to be concerned about the problem. In 1991, nearly 1,000km of the Barwon-Darling River in NSW was affected by a huge algal bloom.

At the time, observers likened it to "a long ribbon of pea soup". The impact wasn't just in the river system where large numbers of fish were killed. Tourism was affected and hundreds of sheep and cattle died. According to the CSIRO², the cause of the bloom was low flow river conditions and high nutrient concentrations, particularly of total phosphorous.

While cleaning products are not the only contributor to such problems, they are a factor where immediate action can easily be taken.

When the American detergent industry banned phosphates in household laundry products in 1993, many environmental campaigners expected the Australian industry to do the same.

After all, they could simply switch to using the same proven formulations that the Americans were using. Sadly, it wasn't to be. Despite Australia's ongoing river problems, far too many leading brands are still using phosphates.

¹ <http://www.cleanwateraction.org/positionstatement/detergent-industrys-voluntary-phosphate-ban-good-news-water-long-time-coming>

² <http://www.publish.csiro.au/paper/MF9960643>

There's an obvious question that needs to be asked here. If the American detergent industry can voluntarily ban phosphates in all their laundry products, then why can't their counterparts in Australia do the same?

Given the susceptibility of Australia's waterways to excess nutrients and phosphates, why aren't our supermarkets and local detergent industry taking a more proactive stance?

What can be done about the problem?

Since the American ban, Australia's supermarkets have continued to sell big name laundry detergent brands that contain phosphates.

This lack of action was why Do Something! launched its campaign in 2010 to ban phosphates in Australia's laundry powder and liquids.

This problem is easy to solve and no legislation is needed to bring about a significant change. Supermarkets just need to use their purchasing clout to tell their suppliers that by the end of 2013, they will stop buying and selling laundry detergents that contain phosphates.

If ALDI, Coles and Woolworths stop selling laundry detergents with phosphates, then it makes no sense for the major detergent companies to make household laundry detergents with phosphate in them.

Our campaign message is simple; 308 million Americans are only able to buy phosphate free laundry powder, so why can't 22 million Australians do the same?

Why the ALDI phosphate ban is such a breakthrough

The decision by ALDI to remove phosphates from ALL the laundry detergents that they sell is a major win for the environment. It's a major step forward for our campaign.

Following discussions between ALDI and Jon Dee from Do Something!, ALDI stated that any ban on phosphates would need to pass the following hurdles:

- ➡ The laundry powder would have to maintain or improve the quality of the wash
- ➡ The price of the laundry powder would NOT increase for consumers

In finding these conditions could be met, ALDI made the decision to ban phosphates in all the laundry detergents they stock.

From the end of 2013, ALDI will no longer sell laundry detergents containing phosphates. **This ban will be implemented at no extra cost to consumers.**

In fact, over half of the laundry detergents currently sold by ALDI are already phosphate free.

Why Coles and Woolworths must follow the ALDI ban

Coles and Woolworths are responsible corporate citizens and Do Something! believe they should join ALDI in taking action on behalf of Australia's waterways. They should match ALDI and give detergent companies till the end of 2013 to phase out the use of phosphates in household laundry detergent products.

As it currently stands, Australian supermarkets are selling phosphate-based laundry detergent products that would not be allowed in American supermarkets. This cannot continue. If the Americans won't sell them, then we shouldn't either.

Doing nothing means taking our waterways for granted. We already allow too many nutrients to end up in our river systems. At some point, we need to do something.

A simple and easy to implement action is to eliminate phosphates from laundry powders and liquids. America is not the only place where this change has happened. Other countries such as Germany and Italy have already moved to ban or limit phosphate in laundry detergents³ and in November 2010, the European Commission announced it proposed to ban phosphates in laundry detergents from January 1 2013.⁴

The ban by ALDI has shown that such a move is possible in Australia. If they can ban phosphates in laundry detergents in over 250 stores, then there is no reason why Coles and Woolworths cannot do the same.

Jon Dee
Founder and Managing Director
Do Something!

³ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2007:0234:FIN:en:PDF>

⁴ <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/1465&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=fr>
and also <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/1465>