Cleaning up the cleaners. By: Green, Emily. New Statesman. 05/08/98, Vol. 127 Issue 4384, p30. 2p. 1 Black and White Photograph. Abstract: Opinion. Discusses pollution of the coastal waters in Great Britain, which is caused by cleaners. Average tonnes of detergent Britons use on a yearly basis; Speculation on the chemicals in the detergents; Area the bulk of regulatory responsibilities fall to; Estimation on the percentage of phosphate pollution detergent accounts for; Importance of labelling of detergents; Reference to the report by the National Consumer Council in 1996 titled Green Claims. (*AN: 684915*)

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**ARGUMENT**

**CLEANING UP THE CLEANERS**

**We need stricter eco-labelling on detergents to curb water pollution**

It has started. The first fair days of spring .have brought a rash of reports about the pollution of our coastal waters. Last week the media was trotting out Greenpeace spokesmen, PRs from water authorities, odd bods from the Environment Agency, good beach guide inspectors and, natch, there was the traditional vox pop from tourists in Blackpool.

How odd that the purity of our water is a seasonal story, for we pollute it 365 days a year, most of us in the name of cleanliness. Every year 59 million Britons in 22 million households go through 1.4 million tonnes of various detergents, 2,625 tonnes spent on washing cars alone.

What exactly is in those household chemicals, those sea-breeze-alpinelemon-meadow-fresh cleaners? We have no idea, and currently no way of finding out. Detergent manufacturers, led by the giants Procter & Gamble and Lever Brothers, do not under the law have to label the exact ingredients of their products. While they spend in the order of £ 138 million a year on advertising, much of it lauding the hygienic and fragrant benefits of cleaners, a simple declaration of ingredients seems too much to ask.

Manufacturers cite commercial sensitivity,. Consider the espionage potential: bootleg editions of "Pot-Pourri" Toilet Duck and mock Jif. Funny? Until one considers that Unilever, owner of Lever Bros, also until recently owned one of the largest cattle feed companies, BOCM Silcock, which advanced exactly the same excuse about why it couldn't label dairy rations. Farmers now protest they did not know about the meat and bonemeal content in feed that, famously, spread BSE.

The UK detergent industry enjoys almost complete self-regulation. The supervision that does exist is fragmented between the EU and UK. The EU recommends which chemicals detergents should not contain; in most cases industry compliance is voluntary. The bulk of regulatory responsibilities falls to the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and the Environment Agency, though neither is too sure as to which does what. However, both will refer queries to the Soap and Detergent Industry Association (SDIA), a trade association representing detergent manufacturers.

The SDIA seems to know government business better than the government does, and will send out reports to interested parties with the Department of Environment's logo stamped on them. These reports are by a group of specialists, many of them scientists of various sorts, known as the Technical Committee on Detergents and the Environment. While the work of the Technical Committee is in effect packaged as government documentation, its members gratefully acknowledge industry data.

The Technical Committee also keeps an open mind about what damage various detergents might already be doing. For example, in 1992 it was still hypothesising about the cause of foam on waterways around London, Yorkshire, the South-west and North-west. This might be due, the committee mused, to cleaning agents being "insufficiently biodegradable". One is left to imagine other causes, such as white water rapids on the LeedsLiverpool canal.

Foaming waterways are nothing new. In 1961 Germany set the first European standards for biodegradability of soap and, more commonly, its petrochemical equivalents. Subsequent EU directives required 80 per cent "primary degradation" within three hours. This means the end of foaming, but not complete biodegradation. The Technical Committee's 1996 report admits to inconclusive understanding about further breakdown in "anaerobic" conditions, meaning in sediment, or ground-water. Out of sight, out of mind.

Well, almost. The government calculates that detergents account for almost 20 per cent of phosphate pollution in UK surface waters. ,To which a reader of industry bumph sent out to schools might object -quoting the Soap and Detergent Industry Association- Hey! Biodegradation "comfortably exceeds the 80 per cent pass level and removals of 95 per cent are observed in efficient sewage treatment plants"! Ah, but check with the water boards and you'll find that 18 per cent of sewage gets the sort of tertiary treatment that can achieve 95 per cent surfactant biodegradation.

Exact labelling is a start, but we would need help to understand it. Anyone know what ethylene-diamine-tetra acetic acid is? (It's a metal sequestering agent and bleach stabiliser, found in products from Mr Muscle to the Body Shop's camomile shampoo for blondes. It sails through sewage works into the aquatic environment; nobody is sure to quite what effect)

We clearly need chemists to scrutinise cleaners for us. In 1992, in compliance with a Europe-wide initiative, the UK Eco-Labelling Board was set up to do just that. Products deemed of acceptably low environmental impact were to receive eco-labels. A government review of this scheme's efficacy is due out shortly: as far as detergents are concerned, it should make quick reading. The submission of cleaners for assessment was made voluntary, and in six years not one British detergent manufacturer has submitted a product. Producers of the lowest-impact cleaners, such as Ecover, complained that the scheme's standards were too lax; market leaders such as Procter & Gamble complained of the slowness of the certification process.

No, the industry preferred its own labelling initiatives. This resulted in a scathing critique, Green Claims, a 1996 report by the National Consumer Council, in which products from Daz to Biological Persil were fingered for boasting biodegradability when they had merely complied with basic EU standards, which are none too stringent. Ariel Futur took the biscuit: it carried a World Wide Fund for Nature panda logo in what emerged was nothing to do with the product's eco-friendliness, but a sponsorship arrangement with the WWF.

As a sensible first step to curb water pollution, eco-labelling didn't work, but it should have - and it could have. It works in Europe. Reckitt & Colman, now a French company, last year received a French eco-label for its Down to Earth washing powder, currently being promoted in Somerfield outlets. Cannily the Scandinavians bypassed the producers and went to retailers. These limited the amount of shelf-space available to products without eco-labels, forcing even the giants such as Procter & Gamble to seek government scrutiny of their products which we so liberally tip into our water supply in the name of cleanliness.