

Report to the Tyne and Wear Trading Standards Joint Committee

24 November 2016

Update on the Involvement of Trading Standards with Environmental Issues

Paul Dowling, Strategic Director, Communities and Environment, Gateshead Council

Purpose of the report

To update the Committee on two proposals to bring in new legislative controls which aim to control two areas of concern.

Microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products

1. Microbeads are round particles of plastic used in cosmetic products as mild exfoliants to help remove dry cells from the surface of the skin or as mild abrasives to help polish the teeth.
2. Microbeads are most likely to be found in soaps, facial scrubs, exfoliating body washes and toothpastes.

The problem

3. It is reported that tens of trillions of microbeads are thought to have been washed down bathroom plugholes into the oceans, harming the health of wildlife and - possibly - humans. Toxic pollutants like pesticides bind to microbeads and they end up being consumed by shellfish and plankton before heading up the food chain.
4. The beads are flushed into rivers and seas by the trillion, causing havoc to marine life and can make their way into the human food chain. MPs have warned that a single shower can release 100,000 microbeads into the ocean, and called for them to be banned from bathroom products.

Government Announcement

5. On the 3 September 2016 Environment Secretary Andrea Leadsom announced plans to ban the sale and manufacture of cosmetics and personal care products containing tiny pieces of plastic, commonly known as 'microbeads'.
6. A consultation will launch with the intention to ban the sale and manufacture of cosmetics and personal care products containing microbeads that harm the marine environment.
7. At the same time, evidence will be gathered on the extent of the environmental impacts of microbeads found elsewhere, such as in household and industrial cleaning products, before considering what more can be done

in future to tackle other plastics, for example microfibers, which enter the marine environment.

8. Environment Secretary Andrea Leadsom said: *“Most people would be dismayed to know the face scrub or toothpaste they use was causing irreversible damage to the environment, with billions of indigestible plastic pieces poisoning sea creatures. Adding plastic to products like face washes and body scrubs is wholly unnecessary when harmless alternatives can be used”*.
9. Twenty-five UK cosmetics and toiletries companies, such as Unilever, have already taken steps to voluntarily phase out microbeads from their products. Waitrose has announced they will stop stocking such products by the end of September.
10. The government will consult industry, environmental groups and other relevant parties to establish how and when a ban could be introduced, aiming to change legislation next year.

Wet Wipes

11. UK water companies have written to the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, in respect of alleged misleading packaging of wet wipes and other sanitary products that claim the items are 'flushable'.

The problem

12. Water UK, the organisation which represents all the UK water companies, said the so-called 'flushable' products cause misery to millions of people around the world by blocking sewers and contributing to floods in their homes and wider environment.
13. A global statement has now been signed by over 247 companies in over 18 countries outlining the water industry's current position regarding flushable labelled products. The international statement recommends that consumers must be given clear and unambiguous information about appropriate disposal methods of products.
14. UK industry watchdog the Consumer Council for Water is supporting the global statement which calls for consumers to be provided with accurate and consistent advice on what not to flush down the loo.
15. Steve Grebby, Policy Manager at the Consumer Council for Water, said: *“its vital consumers are given clear, accurate and consistent advice about what they can safely flush down the loo.”*
16. In the UK alone, water companies estimate it costs £88 million a year to unblock sewers, and more than half of blockages are exacerbated by wipes and hygiene products. This does not include the human and environmental impact and cost.

17. Sarah Mukherjee, Director of Environment at Water UK, said: *“There are strong views from customers and water companies that manufacturers need to take action to stop calling wet wipes “flushable” and help prevent sewer flooding. The financial and emotional cost of a sewer flood in your home is awful and surely it is worth taking every step possible to prevent this happening.”*

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to note the information.

Contact: David Ellerington, City of Newcastle Council on 01912116119 or email david.c.ellerington@newcastle.gov.uk
