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Journey of the Plastic Microbeads: From Science to Legal Policy

May 23, 2015

By Lisa Boyle

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The Plastic Microbead is having its 15 minutes of fame. Though hard to see because it is less than 5mm, the microbead is in the spotlight because it is a surprisingly bad actor. In fact, the microbead should have a Razzie by now. Plastic Microbeads appear commonly in personal care products such as face scrubs, body wash and even toothpaste. A single product can contain as many as 350,000 polyethylene or polypropylene microbeads. But a California ban on the beads and a federal ban being scripted will soon send the plastic microbead into retirement along with other notorious bad actors like lead in paint and gasoline.



Thanks to research conducted by 5 Gyres' Dr. Marcus Eriksen in the Great Lakes , we know that the small plastic beads we have been scrubbing with are washing straight down our drains and into our lakes, rivers and ocean. After this scientific discovery was published, 5 Gyres drafted model legislation to ban the beads from personal care products and published the legislation along with a summary of the science in the first law journal dedicated entirely to legal solutions to Plastic Pollution at Tulane Law School. At the same time, 5 Gyres began to engage with lawmakers in New York and California, and then across the country as legislation took off with the help of many other nonprofits.

Legislation to ban plastic microbeads passed the California State Assembly this morning on a 58-11 vote. The legislation, AB 888, authored by Assemblymember Richard Bloom (D-Santa Monica) and first sponsored in 2014 by LA based environmental

organization The 5 Gyres Institute, would set up the strongest protections in the country against the use of these unnecessary and toxic additives.

Marcus Eriksen, 5 Gyres' Director of Research and the first US scientist to document microbeads in US waters states:

"When we first detected high levels of plastic microbeads in Lake Erie in 2012, we never imagined that this scientific finding would result in a National legislative campaign. This important step towards a victory in California sends a strong signal that the public sector can drive major design changes at the corporate manufacturing level, to protect our National waters, and our health."

The 5 Gyres Institute conducted the first scientific research on plastic pollution in the Great Lakes in 2012, in partnership with SUNY Fredonia. On this expedition, the team documented high levels of microplastics in Lake Erie that they later traced back to personal care products.

"We found one sample with 1600 plastic particles, more plastics by count than any of our ocean samples spanning over 50,000 miles", said Dr. Eriksen. "These particles were all roughly the same shape and size - we had never seen anything like it. We compared these to the plastic beads found in facial scrubs and body washes, and there it was. With this finding, we were able to begin working on the clear solution - banning these unnecessary toxic plastics from products designed to be washed down the drain."

Microbeads have emerged as a pervasive form of pollution in our waterways and marine environment, contributing approximately 38 tons of plastic annually. The tiny particles are prevalent in ocean debris, the Great Lakes, and were found in the Los Angeles River last year. Most microbeads are not biodegradable and absorb various toxins such as DDT, PCBs (flame retardants), and other industrial chemicals and are ingested or absorbed by a variety of marine life and other

mammals. Because fish ingest these particles and absorb the toxins in their flesh, they constitute a direct threat to our seafood.

Assemblymember Bloom states:

"This is not a problem without a solution. Plastic microbeads are not essential to personal care products. Safe and natural alternatives are available such as walnut husks, pecan shells, apricot shells, and cocoa beans. Some brands already use environmentally safe alternatives. However, there are still a number of companies who are holding out. By passing this bill, we will take the first step in phasing out these damaging products completely in California and paving the way for other states and countries to follow our lead."

As 5 Gyres Policy Director and one of the authors of the legislation, I am proud to showcase AB 888 as a perfect example of 5 Gyres' mission to conduct the best science, craft effective legal policy solutions based on our research, and find the best representatives of the people to carry the legislation through the halls of government to become law. 5 Gyres identified Richard Bloom because of his long history of environmental stewardship on the California Coastal Commission, as a City Council Member and Mayor of Santa Monica and in his current office as Representative of the people of the 50th District of California.

Californians Against Waste, Clean Water Action, Breast Cancer Fund, California League of Conservation Voters, Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Environment California, Heal the Bay, Los Angeles Water Keeper, Natural Resources Defense Council, Ocean Conservancy, Sierra Club, and Story of Stuff are a sample of the many other groups in support of the bill.

Having now passed the State Assembly, AB 888 must now pass the State Senate before going to Governor Jerry Brown for his consideration.

Watch here to see The Plastic Microbead as a very bad actor.

 Anna Cummins  Comment

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