



Green movement prying loose details about cleansers

By Jennifer Alsever

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If you've ever wondered whether the products you use to clean your home could be causing health issues, you're not alone.

And now, amid pressure from environmental, health and consumer groups, makers of household cleaning agents are beginning to reveal more about the chemicals in their products, in some cases hoping to head off requirements for greater disclosure.

New York was the first state to require makers of household cleaners to reveal the chemical makeup of their products. Although the law has been on the books for 34 years, only recently has the state begun enforcing the law, bowing to pressure from environmental groups.

As many as 59 percent of Americans say they're concerned about chemicals in their household cleaners, according to a survey released in June by Shelton Group, an advertising firm representing environmental advocates. Credit the green movement and new research that has shown a rise in occupational asthma among custodial

workers and linked chemicals in cleansers to breast cancer in humans and infertility in mice.

The consumer concern isn't lost on major manufacturers. Just this year, Clorox Co., SC Johnson and Proctor & Gamble have begun disclosing what's inside their cleaning products on the Internet and through toll-free phone numbers. Anyone can now go online to view what's inside products like Mr. Clean, Formula 409 and Pledge and research laundry lists of chemicals like alkyl dimethyl benzyl ammonium chloride, tributoxylethyl phosphates and benzisothiazolinone.

That's a big shift because for years, manufacturers kept close guard of their ingredients for fear of revealing trade secrets.

"There's always some level of concern for the same reason Coke doesn't give out its formula," says Ian Tholking, spokesman for Proctor & Gamble, the consumer giant that makes brands such as Dawn, Mr. Clean and

Cascade. "You invest to make the best products.

The New York law only requires that manufacturers disclose ingredients to the Department of Environmental Conservation, which can publicly share them upon request. The department, which cited "staffing issues" for its previous lack of enforcement, has held discussions with manufacturers and environmental and health organizations on how best to share product information with the public.

"This demonstrates that this issue isn't going away," says Erin Switalski, executive director of Women's Voices for the Earth, an environmental group that has campaigned for three years against toxic chemicals in household cleaners, lotions and cosmetics. "Transparency is important to the public."

Environmental groups say the New York law and the voluntary online disclosure by manufacturers are a start, but companies are still not revealing what chemicals are in cleaning product fragrances. Those are kept secret by third-party fragrance makers, says Switalski. Women's Voices of the Earth contends that some fragrances rely on controversial chemicals like phthalates, which have been associated with health problems and infertility.

Scrutinizing product labeling?

Washington is also weighing in. One measure before Congress would require makers of household cleaners to reveal ingredients directly on product labels.

"Given the possible links between cleaning chemicals and health problems, consumers have a right to know what chemicals are in the products they buy," says Rep. Steve Israel, D-N.Y., sponsor of the bill.

Manufacturers generally oppose the labeling measure because they worry ingredient lists would crowd out more important safety and usage information, says Brian Sansoni, spokesman for the American Cleaning Institute, an industry trade group. "A one-size-fits-all mandate for this doesn't work," he says.

Another bill, the Safe Chemicals Act, under review in the Senate, would overhaul a broader U.S. chemical policy by requiring that materials pass safety testing before being used in consumer products. Internationally, companies are preparing to comply with a similar European law known as REACH.

There's no way to pinpoint yet how much these proposed rules could cost. A single ingredient change in one product's formula could cost thousands of dollars just to update labels. But manufacturers are more worried

that more regulation means more bureaucracy and stifle new ideas, says Sansoni of the American Cleaning Institute.

"There would be a big impact on innovation if we had to run new formulations up and down the flagpole," he says.

Clorox is one of a number of mainstream manufacturers that has attempted to appeal to concerned consumers by creating a green product line. Two years after its launch, Clorox's Green Works is the top-selling line of green cleaners.

Last year, retail sales of green cleaners hit \$557 million, but that is just 3 percent of the \$18.6 billion household and laundry cleaner market, according to market researcher Packaged Facts.

Clorox lists the ingredients used in its Green Works products on product labels but does not for its traditional Formula 409, Pine-Sol and Tilex products. Another leading brand of green cleaners, Seventh Generation Inc., lists its ingredients on peel-back labels.

Still, people cannot always determine what's inside many other green products or whether broad claims like "eco-friendly" are substantiated. Companies use some 349 different green labels to market eco-products across the globe, according to Ecolabel Index.

The Federal Trade Commission recently proposed tighter rules for manufacturers of products that promise to be green.

"Cleaning product makers continue to want to use 'eco-friendly' and 'earth-friendly' without saying what they're meaning," says Scott McDougall, president of TerraChoice, a Chicago environmental marketing firm that runs one certification program called EcoLogo. "I think consumers are demanding more."

Quiet change?

Environmental and consumer advocacy groups hope that the New York law will ultimately prompt manufacturers to start quietly reformulating the ingredients of their products to be safer rather than publicly report harmful chemicals.

A study published this summer in the International Journal of Environmental Health suggested that cleaning products might contribute to an increased risk of women developing breast cancer. Another 2009 study by the Environmental Working Group tested an assortment of cleaning products and found they released 457 different chemicals into the air, including chloroform, benzene and formaldehyde.

The American Cleaning Institute called the breast cancer study "rife with innuendo and speculation about the safety of cleaning

products and their ingredients" and said the Working Group study ignored the health benefits from cleaning products and their ability to stop the spread of infectious diseases.