

Bill to Ban Microbeads Approved by House Subcommittee

On May 14, 2015 the U.S. House of Representatives' Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health approved by voice vote, legislation that would ban the sale and distribution of personal care products that contain microbeads starting January 1, 2018. The legislation is titled, "The Microbead-Free Waters Act of 2015" (H.R. 1321) and would amend the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act to phase out the use of microbeads.

Microbeads are tiny bits of polyethylene (plastic), no bigger than a grain of salt. They can be found in more than 100 personal care products like shower gels, facial and body scrubs, and even toothpaste. Up to 300,000 microbeads can be found in a single tube of face scrub.¹ When these products wash down the drain, here's where the problem begins. During the wastewater treatment process, organic materials are broken down by microorganisms, clump

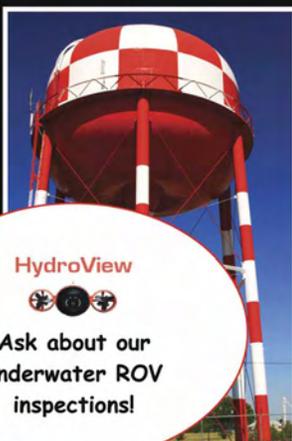
together, and settle as solids. This process isn't as effective with microbeads. The bits of polyethylene are too light and remain in suspension rather than settling on screens during the treatment process. Also, many wastewater treatment plants are not designed to filter these tiny plastic beads from wastewater, so they can be found in the effluent water leaving the treatment plant. As a result, microbeads end up in streams, rivers, and large bodies of water. A recent study conducted by Dr. Sherri A. Mason, an environmental chemist at the State University of New York in Fredonia, revealed concentrations as high as 1.1 million bits of microplastics per square mile in some parts of the Great Lakes' surfaces, with beads making up more than 60 percent of the samples.²

Researchers say some eight trillion microbeads, enough to cover 300 tennis courts, enter water habitats in the U.S. every day. But that's just one percent of the microbeads floating around. The other 99 percent, or 800 trillion microbeads, end up in sewage plants and are spread on land before reaching streams and oceans via runoff.³

Plastic microbeads are not biodegradable and scientists have found that environmental

WHEN DO YOU SERVICE YOUR WATER STORAGE TANK?
IF THE ANSWER IS "AFTER A PROBLEM"
...YOU'RE SPENDING TOO MUCH

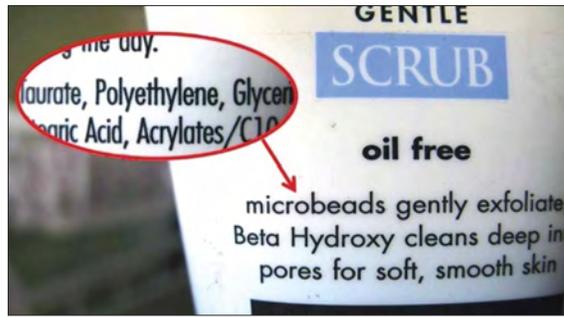
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To know if a product contains microbeads, check the list of ingredients on the product label for the words “polyethylene” or “polypropylene.”



pollutants like PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) attach to the surface of the plastic. The plastic bits can often be mistaken by fish and other organisms as food, as they are roughly the same size as a fish egg. The synthetic chemicals get passed up the food chain and it’s more than likely that humans are consuming plastic microbeads when we eat contaminated fish, shellfish or waterfowl.

Major cosmetic companies, such as Procter & Gamble, Unilever, Johnson & Johnson, and Colgate-Palmolive,

have pledged to phase out the use of microbeads in their products and some companies are testing out alternatives such as sand, ground nut shells or fruit seeds, and salt crystals. In the meantime, lawmakers are taking steps towards banning products that contain microbeads on the state level. Illinois was the first state to ban the manufacture and sale of products containing microbeads. California, Colorado, Connecticut, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, New Jersey, and Wisconsin have followed suit. If you want to

know if your favorite personal care product contains microbeads, check the list of ingredients on the label for the words “polyethylene” or “polypropylene”. If you are scrubbing your face with microbeads, you just might be eating them one day!

Monica Wurtz began work with KRWA in October 2013. She previously worked at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and also worked at US EPA Region 7 for four years. Monica is considered a national expert on various drinking water regulations.

¹ CBS News. “Microbeads could be harming the environment, scientists say.” Accessed September 16, 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/microbeads-could-be-harming-the-environment-scientists-say/>
² New York Times. “Scientists Turn Their Gaze Toward Tiny Threats to Great Lakes.” Accessed September 16, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/15/us/scientists-turn-their-gaze-toward-tiny-threats-to-great-lakes.html>
³ EUREKAAlert. “Ban on microbeads offers best chance to protect oceans, aquatic species”. Accessed September 17, 2015. http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2015-09/osu-bom091615.php

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