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Catching up on state's new crop of green legislation

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

"Going green" just keeps going, faster and faster.

With all the green products, programs and practices constantly being introduced, consumers have a hard time keeping track. Since the Washington Legislature just wrapped up its 2009 session, let's take a look at the latest environmental laws and bills.

Q: Which green legislation passed in our state this year will have the greatest consumer impact?

A: Although very long term, it will most likely be the "Efficiency First" Bill, or 5854 (for details on all bills, search by number or key words at <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/billinfo>). Under this law, homes and buildings constructed after 2013 will be designed to reduce energy use by 70 percent by 2031 (using the 2006 building code as a baseline).

Consumers should see lower energy bills as the result of green provisions in this law. It may not be sexy, but it's one of the most aggressive energy-efficiency laws in the nation.

Q: I love the new electronics recycling law, but heard it just got changed. What's that all about?

A: Under the E-Cycle Washington program that started in January, residents can recycle televisions, computers and computer monitors at no cost at authorized collection sites, including more than 50 locations in King County (see www.ecyclewashington.org or call 800-RECYCLE for info).

The product of a 2006 bill, the program illustrates the "product stewardship" concept, since electronics manufacturers now finance and manage this recycling.

The change made in the law this year (Bill 1522) makes it easier for participating businesses to repair and reuse some collected electronics items, which is environmentally preferable to just dismantling them for recycling.

This change won't directly affect consumers much, though it could result in more low-cost used computers and TVs becoming available for purchase.

Q: Weren't there some product-stewardship bills that were not approved this year?

A: Yes. Bill 1469 required manufacturers of lights that contain mercury (including fluorescent tubes and compact fluorescents) to finance and set up collection and recycling programs.

Bill 1165 required pharmaceutical companies to pay for the collection and disposal of unwanted medicines from consumers. Both of these unsuccessful bills made significant progress in the Legislature, and may return next year.

Q: What about bills that could make consumer products safer or greener?

A: Bill 1180/5282, which banned the use of the chemical Bisphenol-A (BPA) in plastic baby bottles, also came close to passage and might be back next time. The Washington Toxics Coalition and other advocacy groups supporting the bill said numerous studies link BPA to health impacts, including developmental problems in infants.

The American Chemistry Council and other business interests opposing the legislation said abundant scientific evidence also supports the safety of BPA in existing uses. Earlier this month Minnesota became the first state to ban BPA in baby bottles.

Several other Washington state bills approved in recent years restrict certain substances in products, and one that's been getting a lot of attention is the ban on phosphates in dishwasher detergents.

Under this law, passed in 2006 and taking effect statewide in July 2010, dishwasher detergents will no longer be allowed to contain significant amounts of phosphates, which can harm fish and plant life in waterways. The measure is in effect in Spokane and Whatcom counties.

Phosphates were removed from laundry detergents years ago, and several phosphate-free dishwasher detergents are available here. However, some Spokane residents have complained vociferously about the

law, saying the new products do not get their dishes clean. This may be related to Spokane having "hard" water (containing lots of minerals).

If you have strong feelings either for or against potential and proposed green bills, be sure to contact your legislator (<http://apps.leg.wa.gov/DistrictFinder>).

Our laws — and our environment — do belong to everyone, after all.

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