

The Seattle Times

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Ecoconsumer: Will 2010 be a greener year?

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Will 2010 be the year green comes home?

The environment was a hot topic in 2009, but much of that buzz emanated from places like Copenhagen, Denmark, or Washington, D.C., far removed from our day-to-day lives. Today, we'll look at how green issues might touch us on a more personal level in the new year.

Q: My dirty dishes are about as personal as it gets. Is it true my dishwasher detergent is going to become illegal?

A: Ingredients in dishwasher detergent will change, but it's nothing to get in a lather about. Beginning July 1, 2010, the amount of phosphorus (also known as phosphates) in home-dishwasher detergent sold in Washington state will be limited to 0.5 percent. Many dishwasher detergents currently contain about 8 percent phosphorus.

Phosphorus pollutes water, harms aquatic life and cannot be completely removed by treatment plants. This law already has been enacted in Spokane and Whatcom counties because of the severity of the problem in those areas.

Although Washington was the first state to pass this type of legislation, 15 other states now have similar laws that also take effect this July. As a result, major dishwasher-detergent brands are expected to introduce products that clean dishes effectively without phosphorus, and several such products already are available.

Q: Are any other state laws on the horizon for 2010 to help us be greener at home?

A: One bill with a decent chance for passage this year would require drug manufacturers to fund collection programs for unwanted medications. Although some Bartell Drug and Group Health pharmacies currently accept unwanted drugs (see www.medicinereturn.com for locations), the bill would make it much easier for consumers to properly dispose of old medicines.

Q: How about junk mail? I'd love to see the national "do not call" registry for telephone solicitations expanded to include unwanted mail.

A: That may not happen anytime soon, but look for the junk-mail issue to heat up in 2010. On Jan. 11 the Seattle City Council is expected to consider a resolution urging the state Legislature to establish a "do not mail" registry. ForestEthics, a nonprofit activist group, is promoting state legislation as part of its campaign (www.donotmail.org) for a national system.

For any environmental issue involving legislation, one way to make it more personal is to contact your elected representatives to let them know how you feel.

Q: Which green products or trends will have the greatest impact for consumers in 2010?

A: No. 1 would have to be the "smartphone," even though it's not marketed as a green product. This new generation of cellphones can deliver an incredible bounty of information right into the palm of your hand, potentially making our daily activities less wasteful and more efficient.

More than 120,000 applications, or "apps," already exist for smartphones, providing specific resources and services. These include

a growing number of "green apps" with personalized info on green products, recycling, conservation, public transit and more.

The electric car is another green product Seattle-area residents might get a charge out of in 2010. Seattle has received federal funding as a test market for electric cars, and installation of about 2,500 charging stations in the region will begin this year. The new Nissan Leaf electric car is expected to go on sale here by December.

Q: Any other green highlights on the radar for 2010?

A: We'll celebrate a landmark anniversary this year: April 22 will be the 40th Earth Day. It should attract plenty of media attention, which will likely motivate corporations, organizations and governments to launch new green products and initiatives this spring.

"Make every day Earth Day" is an old line, but 2010 should bring us a little closer to that goal in our own homes.

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