

The End Of Microbeads Is Near

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TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) — Environmentalists in Illinois expected a battle over their call for a statewide ban on "microbeads" — tiny bits of plastic used in personal care products such as facial scrubs and toothpaste that are flowing by the billions into the Great Lakes and other waterways. Discovered only recently, scientists say they're showing up inside fish that are caught for human consumption.

But instead of resisting, leading companies quickly collaborated on a ban that was enacted by the state legislature this spring. And with similar measures now pending in at least three other large states, the extinction of microbeads is taking shape as one of the unlikeliest events in the politics of nature: a low-stress compromise by interest groups that are often at each other's throats.

"To have that happen in one year is rare," said Jen Walling of the Illinois Environmental Council, recalling the pessimistic response when she initially sought legislative sponsors. "I was not predicting we'd get it done at all."

Don't get used to it, said Mark Biel of the Chemical Industry Council of Illinois, which represented the product manufacturers during three months of negotiations. The quick deal resulted from unique circumstances, he said, including the availability of substitute ingredients.

"I just concluded that maybe this was one of those issues where it would be smart to try to work something out," he said.

Disagreements over details are delaying similar bills in California and New York, while a measure in Ohio has gained little traction. Still, all sides expect deals in most cases, and that given those states' outsized place in the market, microbeads will disappear from U.S. products as the industry swallows the cost.

Environmentalists hope the collaborative experience carries over to debates concerning the Great Lakes' other ills. Biel's group last year helped scuttle a proposal to restrict flame retardants, which some consider an emerging contaminant in the freshwater seas. Still, he says the microbead talks nurtured a better working relationship, as have negotiations over fending off invasive species like the Asian carp.

"There is room for common ground," he said.

It's been known for years that the world's oceans teem with masses of floating plastic. But microplastics in the Great Lakes were discovered only when scientists dragged the surface of all five lakes in 2012 and 2013 with specially designed nets and found the specks everywhere.

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Barely visible without a microscope, the bits flow through wastewater treatment plant screens and into the lakes. Sherri Mason, an environmental scientist with State University of New York-Fredonia who was a leader of the research team, said the beads are showing up the stomachs of Great Lakes perch and in fish-eating birds like the double-crested cormorant. Her group is studying whether the particles are absorbing toxins in the lakes.

Because treated wastewater flows into so many waterways, Mason said, "Every river and every inland lake you look at is going to have some plastic in it."

The plastic exfoliants apparently came into widespread use in the 1990s, preferred because they are smoother to the skin than natural ingredients. Laurent Gilbert, director of advanced research at L'Oreal, said they have "no proven environmental toxicity."

Still, Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, Colgate, Unilever and L'Oreal are among the companies announcing plans to replace microbeads with natural substances such as ground-up fruit pits, oatmeal and sea salt.

The industry has yet to endorse a California bill that wouldn't make an exception for biodegradable microbeads, which the industry says are on the drawing board. A ban has unanimously passed New York's state Assembly, but is awaiting Senate action while the industry pushes for a slower timetable. The measure would prohibit most cosmetics with microbeads by 2016. The Illinois phase-out is more gradual, running from 2017 to the end of 2019.

The companies say that it can take years to develop new mixtures and get them to market.

But with microbeads apparently on their way out, ban supporters say the lesson is that public pressure can pay off.

"People say, 'Wait, there's plastic in my face wash? In my toothpaste?'" said Mason, who teamed with the California-based organization 5 Gyres on the research. "They understand innately that this isn't right and ... industry definitely responds. When we put our minds to something we can make it happen."

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