

Alkylphenols & Ethoxylates Research Council

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Statement on Wal-Mart Announcement about Nonylphenol Ethoxylates

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Wal-Mart recently announced a list of eight “priority” chemicals that have already been 95% removed from the personal care, paper, cleaning, pet and baby products that it sells as part of an effort to remove controversial chemicals and promote sustainable chemistry. While the selection criteria are not entirely transparent, according to statements by Wal-Mart the priority chemicals were chosen based the company’s consultation with the Environmental Defense Fund and Wal-Mart’s intention to promote products that reduce or eliminate the use of hazardous substances. This focus on the hazard of chemicals does not consider whether the exposure to chemicals poses any actual risk to the consumer during use or to the environment after disposal.

Nonylphenol ethoxylates (NPEs) were identified by Wal-Mart as one of the eight priority chemicals. NPEs are well-studied, cost-effective and reliable cleaning ingredients, now primarily used in industrial and institutional applications. NPEs were once commonly used in household detergents and cleaning products. NPEs have been used in cleaning applications for over 50 years because they work so well, typically require lower use levels in cleaning products and are cost-effective. When exposure to consumers during use and to the environment after disposal is considered, NPEs do not present a risk.

US EPA established Water Quality Criteria (WQC) for nonylphenol (NP), an environmental degradant of NPE that is toxic to aquatic species. WQC set safe levels for this compound in water and considered the compound’s effect on the toxicity, reproductive capabilities and development of fish and other aquatic animals and plants.

A review of environmental monitoring studies conducted in the United States by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and other independent researchers over 15 years found that except in a very few cases - where other problems with pollution exist - levels of NP/NPEs in the aquatic environment are below the US EPA WQC and are not a concern.¹

Governmental assessments conducted on NP/NPEs conclude that these compounds do not represent a risk to human safety in their current uses.²

APERC urges Wal-Mart to refocus its Sustainability Program on the development of criteria that are based on and are relevant to a product’s use and disposal. The vast majority of detergents and cleaning products are disposed and treated via wastewater treatment facilities. NPEs are effectively treated and removed in the most common forms of wastewater treatment in the US.³ This should factor into decisions about product selection. A program that promotes product reformulation to remove an ingredient that has been demonstrated by extensive scientific research and risk assessment not to be a risk does not serve the consumer. It distracts research and administrative resources without ensuring a positive impact on human health or environmental safety.

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The Alkylphenols & Ethoxylates Research Council (APERC) is a North American organization whose mission is to promote the continued safe use of alkylphenols and their derivatives through science-based research, product stewardship and outreach efforts, within the framework of responsible chemical management.

¹ Klecka, G., Zabik, J., Woodburn, K., Naylor, C., Staples, C., & Huntsman, B. (2007). Exposure analysis of C8- and C9-alkylphenols, alkylphenol ethoxylates, and their metabolites in surface water systems within the United States. Human and Ecological Risk Assessment, 13 (4), 792-822.

² Environment Canada and Health Canada. (2001). Priority Substances List Assessment Report: Nonylphenol and Its Ethoxylates.

³ Melcer, H., Klečka, G., Monteith, H., & Staples, C. (2007). Wastewater treatment of alkylphenols and their ethoxylates: A state of the science review. Water Environment Federation, Alexandria, VA