

Washing Your Clothes Washington's Way

by Michael Heberling

Our home is becoming less and less our castle as the government moves in . . . one room at a time. First there was the bathroom. Working toilets were outlawed in 1992 in favor of the environmentally friendly government toilets. (See my “The Federally Mandated Toilet Still Doesn’t Work,” November 2001.) On January 1, 2004, the federal government will move into your laundry room as well. On that date you will no longer be able to buy a washing machine that works, like the one you currently use. Stores will be able to sell only the government-mandated washing machines, which are 22 percent more “efficient” than the archaic washers of today. Three years later the required level of efficiency improvement will rise to 35 percent.¹ However, you shouldn’t complain or be angry that your freedom of choice is being taken away. You should instead be grateful. For you see, the government washing machine will not only “save” you money, it will also be good for the environment.

For those of you who can’t wait until 2004 to save both money and the environment, there is good news. Those “efficient” environmental washing machines are available right now. They use 25 percent less water and 40 percent less energy. This

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translates into lower water, gas, and electric utility bills.

Unfortunately, there is a very serious disconnect here. If these new “efficient” washing machines are so wonderful, why does the federal government need to outlaw the primitive, costly, and inefficient old washing machines? If these new washing machines are so fantastic, shouldn’t they be selling like hotcakes at your local department or appliance store? Yes, they should. The problem is . . . they aren’t. They make up less than 10 percent of the new washer sales. This fact should raise a red flag that something is definitely amiss.

Why don’t the consumers like these new “efficient” washing machines that are so strongly endorsed by the federal government and by environmentalists? Well, for starters the washing machine that is advertised to “save” consumers so much money will cost about \$241 more than an old-style washing machine. Many would-be customers are also freaked out by the front-loading (as opposed to top-loading) design. This discovery leads to some very down-to-earth questions like: Can children open that front door while the machine is running? Will water go all over the floor if they do open it? If I find a lone sock after the machine has started, can I open the door to throw it in?

There are some other facts that would-be consumers should be aware of (and that the government conveniently fails to disclose). Most of the new washers will use a “tum-

bler” system where the laundry load rotates as it does in a clothes dryer. While a traditional washer uses gravity as an ally, the new horizontal-axis washing machine must be reinforced to accommodate what is essentially a “dryer filled with water.” This means that the new washers have more parts and are heavier than the old fashioned machines. Translation: The environmental washing machines deplete the world’s “limited natural resources” faster than traditional washers. (That’s certainly not going to make Gaia, the environmentalists’ Earth Goddess, very happy.) What makes the government-approved washer so efficient is that it has eliminated the “agitator,” the critical cleaning component of the traditional washer. With the government washer, you will no longer be able to use ordinary laundry detergent. If you do, watch out for oversudsing. If you use less detergent, it won’t get the clothes clean. To solve this problem you will need to purchase “special” detergent. (“Special” is a euphemism for more expensive.)

Skepticism Called For

Given that our government was less than forthcoming about the problems associated with the environmental toilet, we should be skeptical this time of any government claims relating to “efficient” washers. It is very hard to get the “big savings” promised by former Energy Secretary Bill Richardson if the cost of the product goes up by 59 percent. There would need to be a phenomenal savings in water and energy usage to offset this steep price increase. To achieve any kind of savings (let alone “big savings”), the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) had to present a very unrealistic scenario in which the government washer is used 392 times a year (or 7½ loads each and every single week) over a period of 14 years.²

There are two major problems with this. According to the Mercatus Center, less than 15 percent of the washers get such heavy use.³ And most of us will not keep our washers as long as the DOE says we will. Because Americans move so frequently, many washers get left behind even though there may be

a number of useful years left on the machine. Also, lots of us will decide to buy a new washer (before realizing the “big savings”) when faced with an expensive repair bill.

In fact, maintenance costs for these new machines could be significant. Whenever there is a revolutionary design change in any product, expect problems. It should be noted that there has already been a recall by one of the major washer manufacturers. For the record, the traditional washer made by this same manufacturer was not recalled. If nothing else, the old-style washers are reliable. They have been around for a long time, and they have been improving every year. The government estimate of “big savings” did not even address the likelihood there would be higher maintenance costs associated with the environmental washer.

In calculating the total cost of ownership, the government made two other questionable assumptions. The DOE used an inexplicably low discount rate. According to the Competitive Enterprise Institute, it should have used either an average credit-card or consumer-loan rate. CEI also states that the Energy Department “uses highly problematic forecasts of energy prices extending decades into the future.”⁴ By using a low discount rate and exaggerating energy costs, the government significantly overstates the hypothetical future savings.

With this information, it would appear that very few Americans will reap any savings from this “efficient” washer. In fact, most consumers will actually be monetarily worse off with a government washer. However, the biggest losers will be America’s poor and elderly. For families with annual incomes under \$20,000, only 9.8 percent do as many loads as the DOE estimates. But the DOE did not use the same figure for low-income families as it did for the general population. It used an even higher figure of 410 washloads per year instead of the already questionable 392. From the DOE’s perspective, the poor will benefit more than any one else with a government washer.⁵

Among Americans 65 or older, only 11.3 percent do as many washloads as the government estimates. Even with the DOE’s

rosy (but unrealistic) scenario, 28 percent of the elderly will actually suffer a net cost increase with the “efficient” washer. Before the government got into the consumer appliance business, many senior citizens, especially those with back trouble, did not like the standard front-loading dryers. They are definitely not enthralled with the idea of now having to contend with a front-loading washer as well. This will certainly come as bad news, but our “Earth First” government is not going to make any exceptions to this mandate. America’s seniors are going to have to bend over for the environment like the rest of us.

The government mistakenly believes (or does its best to convince us) that low operating cost is the most important, if not the only, product criteria of concern to consumers, be it for automobiles or for washing machines. This is clearly not the case. For washing machines, consumers consider reliability and low price to be far more important. As is the case for almost all products, consumers weigh many factors in their purchase decision. In addition to the criteria already mentioned, capacity and ease of use are also important considerations.⁶

Manufacturers' Complicity

What about the washing machine manufacturers? Aren't they outraged that the federal government is dictating what they can, and cannot, sell to the public? Ironically, they were a major player in this conspiracy. On May 23, 2000, a cabal composed of appliance manufacturers, energy-efficiency advocates, environmentalists, and the federal government agreed to foist this monstrosity of a washing machine on American consumers, whether we like it or not.

Participants in this landmark government-industry agreement to save the environment included: the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers, Alliance Laundry Systems, Amana, Asko, Frigidaire, General Electric Appliances, Maytag, Miele, Fisher & Paykel, Whirlpool, and the Department of Energy. Other organizations that supported the agreement included the Natural

Resources Defense Council, the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, the Alliance to Save Energy, Northwest Power Planning Council, the City of Austin, Pacific Gas and Electric Company, the Appliance Standards Awareness Project and the California Energy Commission.⁷

Of all these organizations, which one represented the consumer?

After the agreement was made, there was a lot of backslapping from the participants and a flurry of press releases that made some rather extravagant (but fortunately unprovable) claims.

“Today’s announcement is a victory for consumers, manufacturers, and for the environment. The standards announced today will save enough electricity to light 16 million US homes for 25 years, while cutting greenhouse gas emissions by an amount equal to that produced by three million cars every year,” said then-secretary Richardson.

“As a result of the new agreement, consumers nationwide will save nearly 5 quadrillion Btu (British thermal units) of energy and reduce water use by some 10.5 trillion gallons over a 25-year period. That translates into a savings of as much as 18 gallons of water per wash,” chimed in a DOE news release.

“The clothes washer standards that manufacturers have agreed to will reduce hot water use and the total energy consumption associated with clothes washers by about one-third. As a result, consumers will cut their energy, water, and detergent purchases by over \$25 billion during the next 30 years,” said Howard Geller, executive director of the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy.

“This is a significant victory for the environment. The water savings will reach up to 11 trillion gallons, meaning less water needs to be pumped from America’s aquifers and rivers, and less strain on already overtaxed water and sewer systems,” said Andrew deLaski, executive director of the Appliance Standards Awareness Project.⁸

“Whirlpool endorses this historic agreement that not only represents a significant advancement in energy efficiency, but will also benefit

the environment,” said Jeff Fettig, president and COO of Whirlpool Corporation.

The washer manufacturers’ willingness to cut a deal with the government at the expense of the consumer had less to do with altruistic environmental concerns and more to do with crass monetary incentives. By having the government guarantee a market for the more expensive “efficient” washers, the manufacturers can expect a financial windfall. And to sweeten the pot even more, the government will give each manufacturer of those washers a generous tax credit for each machine that is produced.

If the pharmaceutical industry had collectively agreed to restrict consumer choices and to raise prices like the washer manufacturers, the news media, Congress, and consumer-advocate groups would have demanded that the Justice Department initiate antitrust proceedings under the Sherman Act. However, since our government is no longer for the people, but is rather of the environment, by the environment, and for the environment, any activity or collusion to restrict trade, no matter how bizarre or illegal, is condoned so long as it is labeled “Earth-friendly.”

On January 12, 2001, eight months after the washing machine manufacturers, environmentalists, and the federal government agreed to sell out the American consumer, the Department of Energy issued its regulations for “efficient” washers. This was just one of many 11th-hour environmental regulations that were railroaded through the system by the departing Clinton administration. Of these, the “reducing arsenic in the water” regulation received the most media attention. Opposing the “arsenic” regulation made the Bush administration look like it was . . . against the environment. To avoid another public-relations disaster, the Bush administration has apparently decided to minimize future confrontations relating to environmental regulations. This may help explain why the Bush administration approved the efficiency standards for washing machines on April 12, 2001.⁹

Given the government’s success in mandating environmentally friendly toilets and

washing machines, it would be safe to assume that it will become even more emboldened to dictate what products we can, and cannot, buy in the future. As it turns out, the government air conditioner, heat pump, water heater, and refrigerator are already in the works. You can bet that these products will not only provide “big savings” for the consumer, but will be great for the environment as well.

As our country continues to move from a market-based economy to one where centralized planning dominates, we can look forward to simplified one-stop shopping at a local government store in the not-too-distant future. Although it will have a very limited selection, all products in the government store will be guaranteed to be good for the environment. Even though the American “Yugo” will be a deathtrap, it will get 50 miles to the gallon. The government stove, dishwasher, and refrigerator will result in more deaths from salmonella and E. coli, but they will definitely provide “big savings” for consumers, that is, if we live long enough.

In the near term, we must accept the fact that this government washing-machine nightmare is not going to go away. So plan to keep your primitive (but reliable and easy to use) washer until the summer of 2003. Then go out and buy the very best primitive washer you can find while it is still legal to do so. Plan to keep it for at least 14 years (the DOE figure) and pray that, in the interim, our government comes to its senses. □

1. James Plummer, “New Washing Machine Rules: Questions and Answers,” *Consumer Alert*, February 2001.

2. Thomas Bray, “First Toilets, Now Washing Machines,” *Detroit News*, March 21, 2001.

3. “Majority of Americans Disapprove of Proposed Washing Machine Regulation,” Mercatus Center, December 1, 2000.

4. “Petition for Administrative Reconsideration of Energy Conservation Program for Consumer Products: Clothes Washer Energy Conservation Standards,” Competitive Enterprise Institute, March 13, 2001.

5. “DOE Clothes Washer Addendum—Poll Results,” Mercatus Center, December 4, 2000.

6. “New DOE Proposal A Wash,” *Portrait of America*, December 1, 2000.

7. “Washing Machines To Become More Energy Efficient,” United States Department of Energy News, May 23, 2000.

8. “More Efficient Washing Machines to Save Consumers More Than \$25 Billion,” *EarthVision Environmental News*, May 24, 2000.

9. Ronald Brownstein, “Bush Steps Lightly With His Agenda After Triggering Clinton Land Mines,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 2001.