

Tropiclean Invests in Cutting-Edge Corn-Based Packaging

Tropiclean plans to introduce new “green” packaging for its entire line of 18-ounce bottles this April. The new bottles will be made with PLA (polylactic acid), which is derived from corn rather than petroleum like many traditional plastics, making it 100 percent biodegradable when exposed to high heat in a commercial compost setting.

Derrick Kassebaum, director of sales and part owner of Cosmos Corp. in St. Louis, which owns the brand line Tropiclean as well as Spa: Lavish Your Pet and Oxy Med, said it will introduce the new packaging at the Global Pet Expo in San Diego, but Petco will be the first retailer to feature the new bottles, beginning April 1. Tropiclean’s 10,000 independent retailers will also carry it, he said.

Tropiclean had been using a stock bottle and was looking to change its packaging when it came upon the corn-based product. Although PLA’s applica-



tions vary from plastic bags to clothing, putting certain products into bottles made with the substance presents some challenges because it allows more gases (i.e., the bubbles in soda) and liquid to escape than the often preferred polyethylene terephthalate. Tropiclean, however, found a local company that is producing a less porous PLA.

“We can now put a shampoo in it,” he said. “It will not lose its

content. You may lose a percent over a 12-month period, but that’s no more than a regular bottle.”

Although Wal-Mart and other retailers have been using PLA in some food packaging, many manufacturers have stayed away from putting liquids into PLA bottles, Kassebaum said.

“We’re taking a chance on our end,” he said.

It is precisely because of its smaller size that Tropiclean can successfully execute this launch, he added.

“If we get the bottle out there and it starts cracking in two years, we’re small enough that we could get them back,” Kassebaum said. He doesn’t expect that to happen, however.

Although the bottle biodegrades within 180 days in the proper setting and the wrapper within 90 days, Kassebaum said it’s “fine on the shelf.”

Kassebaum declined to name the company Tropiclean is work-

ing with due to competition concerns. An Ohio company will also produce a PLA sleeve for the bottle. Tropiclean expects to convert its spray bottles to PLA packaging next year.

Although the new bottles will cost it a little more, the company will not pass the increase on to its customers because it anticipates significant sales growth from environmentally conscious shoppers. In recent years Tropiclean’s sales rose 20 percent to 25 percent annually, but the new packaging could “help us grow 40 percent to 45 percent,” Kassebaum said.

Language on the packaging itself, as well as shelf displays, will point out the bottles’ biodegradable status. Tropiclean also hired a public relations firm to further disseminate its message through multiple channels.

Proponents of PLA say it reduces reliance on oil and offers a solution to reducing the number of bottles sitting in

landfills. Newman’s Own Chief Executive Officer Peter Meehan was quoted in a 2006 Smithsonian magazine article as saying, “No one has ever gone to war over corn.”

Critics like Paul Goettlich, director of Mindfully.org, worry that industrial farming practices used to supply producers of the biodegradable plastic will damage the environment in other ways, such as the use of herbicides and insecticides as well as some genetically modified crops.

The Smithsonian article voiced similar concerns from Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute, and others. Some complain there are not enough facilities where the PLA bottles can safely break down, and if consumers toss the containers into the recycling bin, they could wind up costing their local programs more money.