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### What are Biocleaners and what do FM's need to know about them?

Mike Sawchuk

+ MARKETPLACE

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As many jansan distributors and building services contractors (BSCs) know, green cleaning chemicals, were first introduced to North America in the 1970s mostly for residential use. Unfortunately, many of these products were not as green as initially portrayed or believed. Others did not work all that well, and virtually all were substantially more expensive than comparable, nongreen cleaning products for the home.

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However, some of these early products caught on with the consumer and proved to have lasting value. Many of those that grew in popularity (because they performed reasonably well), were derived from agricultural products, such as corn, soybeans, coconuts, and citrus. Today, a large portion of the "natural" and green cleaning products intended for consumer use are made from these agricultural products.

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With few exceptions, initially, the professional cleaning industry showed only limited interest in what we now refer to as "biocleaners." Yet interest has grown considerably in the past few years, and expectations are that biocleaners, especially those that are proven green or green certified, will play an even bigger role in cleaning in years to come.

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### First Step Defining Bio cleaners

Biocleaners are made from many of the same agricultural products mentioned above. Some are bio-enzymatic cleaners, formulated with specific enzymes that "eat" soils, often resulting in a deeper level of clean and better odor control.

To explain this process further, the bacteria in the bio-enzymatic cleaners feed on and digest the soils, eliminating them and any odors they may cause. Via a fairly complex chemical reaction, the bacteria metabolize the soils down to water and carbon dioxide, essentially consuming the waste. In some ways, this can be compared to how some contact lenses are cleaned. Specially formulated enzymes eat protein deposits and other soils that develop on the lenses.

The fact that many of the bio-enzymatic cleaners digest soils has proved to be one of their key features. This is especially helpful when cleaning hard-to-reach areas, such as the grout or textured crevices in tiles. The bio cleaner settles into these areas, digest soils, and continue to work for up to 80 hours. This extended cleaning action can help keep damp and heavily used areas, such as locker rest rooms and showers, cleaner and odor free longer.

### What's Fueling the Bio Trend



As mentioned earlier, the professional cleaning industry appears to be taking bio- and bio-enzymatic cleaners more seriously now than it did in years past. There are a few reasons for this. First, and probably of greatest importance, the performance of these products has improved significantly in recent years. The products also are more cost competitive so distributors have fewer qualms about marketing biocleaners, since more customers find them helpful.

"Several years ago, biobased [cleaning] products were not cost effective, and they just didn't work," says Michael Martin, branch manager for Swish Kenco, a jansan distributor in Bangor, ME. "In the past few years, however, there have been great strides made. Now, they work, and they are cost effective."

Another reason for the greater interest is that many biocleaners are now certified green by such organizations as EcoLogo™, Green Seal, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Design for the Environment (DfE). For facilities that have transferred to a green cleaning program or are planning to do so, this makes bio- and bio-enzymatic cleaners a strong option.

But the big push for biocleaners may have come from the federal government. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) created the BioPreferred program as part of the 2002 Farm Bill, which was expanded by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008. The program, managed by the USDA, has the following goals:

- Promote the increased use and purchase of biobased products, which includes biocleaners

- Designate that a certain percentage of items purchased, such as cleaning products requested by federal agencies, be biobased
- Encourage U.S. economic development (by growing agricultural products that can be used to make other products)
- Create new jobs and new markets for farm commodities
- Reduce petroleum needs and consumption used to manufacture cleaning products
- Promote sustainability by using natural resources
- Help reduce adverse environmental and health impacts.

This big push went a step further as a result of Executive Order 13514, which was signed into law by U.S. President Barack Obama in October 2009 and further encourages the purchase of biocleaners wherever and whenever possible. The goal of the order is for the U.S. government to "lead by example" by setting sustainability performance standards and selecting products that are derived from renewable resources and have less negative impact on health and the environment.

### Market Segments

As a result of the BioPreferred program and Obama's executive order, the current markets and industries that appear to be most interested in bio- and bio-enzymatic cleaners are government-related at the federal as well as state and local levels.

School districts and other educational facilities that have transferred to green cleaning—many as a result of state mandates—also are proving to be a significant and growing market for bio and bio-enzymatic cleaners. As long as the products are cost competitive and meet performance standards, the fact that biocleaners are made from renewable resources that appear healthier for children as well as school custodians, staff, and visitors makes these products attractive. Further, these locations often must grapple with odor problems as well as the cleaning of hard-to-reach areas. Because bio-enzymatic cleaners work well at eliminating odors as well as digesting the bacteria in tile and grout, school and educational facility managers have taken note.

Locations that have incorporated a green cleaning program, especially those that are Leadership in Environmental and Energy—or LEED—certified, find proven green bio and bio-enzymatic cleaners an attractive option, for the same reasons.

### Homework

We have discussed the many attributes of bio and bio-enzymatic cleaners, but not all of them are alike. When selecting biocleaners, both distributors and BSCs must do their homework. Just as with all cleaners—conventional or green—performance standards vary, and some may work better in certain situations and on certain surfaces than others. Costs also vary, and the most expensive product is not necessarily the best-performing product.

Further, not all biocleaners have been green-certified; in fact, many bio-enzymatic products have not. And some that contain citrus as a key cleaning agent have actually lost certification because we now know citrus—specifically with H2O2 with d-limonene—can be an irritant or toxicant, causing allergic reactions for some people. However, these issues can be avoided by simply looking for the certification marking on the product.

If certified and proven green, biobased cleaning products may be a good fit for any green cleaning program as they promote sustainability and U.S. economic growth at the same time.

This article first appeared in the 2011 Postconvention issue of ISSA Today.



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