

# Phosphorus Encyclopedia Article

## Phosphorus

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# Phosphorus

An important chemical element, which has the atomic number 15 and atomic weight 30.9738. Phosphorus forms the basis of a large number of compounds, by far the most environmentally important of which are **phosphates**. All plants and animals need phosphates for growth and function, and in many natural waters the production of algae and higher plants is limited by the low natural levels of phosphorus. As the amount of available phosphorus in an aquatic **environment** increases, plant and algal growth can increase dramatically leading to eutrophication. In the past, one of the major contributors to phosphorus **pollution** was household **detergents** containing phosphates. These substances have now been banned from these products. Other contributors to phosphorus pollution are **sewage treatment** plants and **runoff** from cattle **feedlots**. (Animal feces contain significant amounts of phosphorus.) **Erosion** of farmland treated with phosphorus fertilizers or animal manure also contributes to eutrophication and **water pollution**.

## See Also

Cultural Eutrophication