

EPP -- What Makes a Product Green?

This tip sheet corresponds with Green Star Award Standard #3 – Reduce Solid Waste Disposal. Another useful tool is Chapter 5 in “Becoming a Green Star: A Waste Prevention Guide for Anchorage Businesses.” You can find the guide online in pdf and html format at www.greenstarinc.org/guideindex.php or request a hard copy from Green Star. See also Tip Sheets #1 and #21 for more information about environmentally preferable purchasing.

What Makes A Product Green?

There are many factors that contribute to a product’s environmental impact. A lifecycle analysis of a product’s environmental impact is the most comprehensive way of evaluating a product’s environmental impact. A life-cycle analysis includes evaluating extraction or harvesting of materials, manufacturing processes, transportation of materials and finished products, use and disposal and/or reuse of products and packaging.

Currently the resources and tools in environmental purchasing are not yet developed enough to be able to evaluate the entire life-cycle of most products. However, when choosing which product to purchase, keep in mind the impact of each stage in the product’s lifecycle and the related environmental factors.

For example, purchasing a used ENERGY STAR printer with recyclable printer cartridges has a more positive impact than simply purchasing an ENERGY STAR printer, and don’t forget that the printer can be recycled at the end of its lifecycle!

Why Purchase Certified Products?

Certifications ensure that products meet specific human health and environmental criteria. Certifications hold manufacturers accountable for their “green” claims and help to avoid “greenwashing.” Certification does the legwork for you, as long as you understand the certification criteria.



What Does Certification Cover?

Be sure to consider what a certification does and does not cover. Products have an entire lifecycle, including extraction of materials, transportation, manufacturing, packaging, dispersal, use and finally reuse, recycling and/or disposal. Products should still be durable and high performing.

If products don’t last long they will be disposed of quickly creating more waste and if they do not perform well they are of no use. Most product certifications certify the environmental impact of the use of the product, some cover manufacturing and some consider disposal. Take into consideration all these factors when purchasing a product. Purchasing a certified product is a great first step! That first step is even better if you purchase a certified product with recyclable packaging!

Who Sponsors The Certification?

When evaluating certifications, check who sponsors them. For example, an industry association certification may be less rigorous than an environmental non-profit. All certifications should be transparent and educate about the requirements to gain certification. There also are certifications that manufacturers create for their own products. Third-party certifications are more reliable than industry certifications. See the other side of this tip sheet for more details about certifications.

Key Environmental Factors

- Abundance of Resource
- Replacement/Replenishment/Reuse of Resource
- Durability of Material
- Recycled Content of Product and/or Packaging Materials
- Recyclability of Product and/or Packaging Materials
- Embodied Energy of Material
- Conservation of Energy During Use
- Avoided Production of Solid Waste / Diversion of Materials from Landfill
- Carbon Dioxide / Fossil Fuel Emissions
- Ozone Depletion
- Indoor Air Quality / Healthy for Humans
- Heavy Metals / Toxins
- Habitat Destruction – Water, Soil, Biodiversity, Erosion, Silt, Noise
- Cruelty Free / Not Tested On Animals
- Local Materials
- Fair Trade

First, Second and Third Party Certifications

First-party certification is when a manufacturer certifies its own product. For example, SEGC 114 is an internal certification developed by Coastwide Laboratories for its own use.

Second-party certification is when an entity, such as a government agency or a non-profit organization, or certification company develops standards and certifies manufacturers themselves. Green Star is considered a second-party certifier.

Third-party certification occurs when a certification company certifies that manufacturers meet the standards that a separate organization has developed. An example of a third-party certification is a contractor that certifies ISO 14001 standards.

While all certification levels demonstrate an advanced level of commitment to the environment, the more removed from the product a certifier is, the more reliable and unbiased the certification.

Some standard-setting organizations like Energy Star and the new Green Electronics Council establish standards that ensure compliant products are environmentally preferable, but do not label or certify products. Such systems often allow vendors to self-certify that they meet the specific criteria – in a recognized program that includes spot checks of compliance and other safeguards, this can be acceptable.

Beware of:

- unverified claims from manufacturers or distributors.
- manufacturers or distributors drawing attention to one green attribute while ignoring harmful aspects of the product.
- manufacturers or distributors displaying a certification logo on a product that is not certified (check out the certification organization's website).
- hidden ties to industry, with green standards based more on marketing than environmental improvements.

Environmentally Preferable Purchasing Resources

Alaska Building Science Network's Green Building Products Guide - www.absn.com

Chlorine Free Products Association - www.chlorinefreeproducts.org

Consumer Reports Greener Choices - www.greenerchoices.org

Green Star's Alaska Green Products Database - www.greenstarinc.org

Green Star's Alaska Materials Exchange - www.greenstarinc.org/ame/ameindex.php

Hospitals for a Healthy Environment EPP Guide - www.geocities.com/EPP_How_to_Guide

Office of the Federal Environmental Executive - <http://www.ofee.gov/gp/gp.asp>

Oikos Green Buildings Source - <http://oikos.com>

Pollution Prevention Resource Center Purchasing Resources- www.pprc.org/pubs/epp/epp_report.cfm

U.S. EPA Comprehensive Procurement Guidelines - www.epa.gov/cpg

U.S. EPA Design for the Environment - www.epa.gov/dfe

U.S. EPA Environmentally Preferable Purchasing Program Web Site - www.epa.gov/epp

U.S. EPA and DOE's Energy Star Program - www.energystar.gov

U.S. EPA WasteWise Updates - www.epa.gov/wastewise

U.S. EPA WaterSense - www.epa.gov/watersense



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