

Certified Green?

More and more products are being stamped with 'eco-labels.' The question is: What exactly do they mean?

By Greg Zimmerman

Trademarks and symbols for green product certifications and labels are everywhere: product packaging, manufacturers' Web sites, print advertising and trade show booths. The names are probably familiar: [Greenguard](#), [Green Seal](#), [Energy Star](#), [Environmentally Preferable Products](#), [SmartWood](#), [Green Label Plus](#), to name a few. But for facility executives hoping to use these green certifications and labels as one of many criteria for product selection, it's important to understand both what they are, and what they are not.

What the green certifications, otherwise known as eco-labels, do is verify that a product meets specific standards. They offer a third-party validation, a way to determine a product's green qualifications. Because any green certification or label is voluntary, green product certifications are showcases for manufacturers genuinely interested in being taken seriously by facility executives who want to purchase products with verified green claims.

Green product certifications and labels complement the [U.S Green Building Council's](#) LEED rating system as tools for facilitating a market shift to more environmentally responsible buildings. While LEED looks at whole-building green design, the green product certifications and labels look at the specific characteristics of the individual products. LEED is the most recognizable rating system for whole-building green design, whereas each green certification or label has its own criteria.

Like LEED, however, the goals of these green product certifications and labels are to validate specific environmental criteria and create awareness for environmentally responsible building. In most cases, though, these eco-labels don't certify a product as holistically green or attempt to make any observations about a product's sustainability or quality. While many consider green certifications to be overall stamps of approval, they are really only marks indicating that a product meets the criteria specified in the standard of a particular certifying or labeling body.

This means facility executives should look beyond certifications when evaluating the environmental impact of a product. A product may be certified with a high percentage of recycled content, for example, but that product may only last one quarter as long as a traditional product when installed in a building. Despite its lack of recycled content, the better quality product is probably the more environmentally preferable because it will last longer. Fewer resources will be consumed to replenish the product supply and meet market demand.

Wiping Out Greenwash

Still, green certifications are a good indicator that specific environmental claims have been verified.

“The certifications really help a purchaser who may not be a technical expert in any one area to buy a product with some level of confidence that it really has been tested,” says Steve Ashkin, president of the Ashkin Group and a member of the steering committee for LEED for Existing Buildings. “The green certifications give purchasers confidence that the product really completes all the environmental issues expected.”

Put another way, the green product certifications and labels can help limit greenwash.

As the demand for green products has accelerated, manufacturers have increasingly used green as a hook to market products, with little or no verification of the data being reported. Marketers have learned that green is gold and have bent over backwards to tout the greenness of their products —and that has contributed to confusion about which environmental claims are actually true.

“Manufacturers are doing it because they know the public wants green and they want to sell product,” says Michael Italiano, president and CEO of Sustainable Products Corp. “It’s rampant throughout the market right now.”

“Most manufacturers are going to emphasize the positive attributes of their products while playing down less attractive attributes,” says Paul Bertram, president and CEO of PRB Design, a company that helps manufacturers develop product information programs. “Green labeling programs help to bring consistency in reporting and meeting specific program requirements.”

Even though 99.9 percent of manufacturers are probably honest and sincere, Ashkin says, greenwash is still alive and well. Generally, greenwash can run the gamut from inadvertent “little green lies,” like adding the phrase “environmentally friendly” to a product’s marketing when the product hasn’t been changed at all, to blatant untruths meant to purposefully hoodwink a buyer. Lawsuits brought by the EPA against individual manufacturers are making outrageous green claims less common. Italiano remembers serving as an expert witness at one such trial where the manufacturer was required to inform every customer to whom they’d sold a product that what they had been saying about their product was inaccurate. “Instead, they just discontinued the product and paid the fine,” he says.

The Federal Trade Commission has gotten involved too, publishing a list of Environmental Marketing Guidelines that give manufacturers a list of rules to follow, as well as phrases and cliches to avoid, when marketing products as green.

The lawsuits, marketing guidelines and the self-policing nature of the industry have been effective at curbing blatant greenwash. However, instances of inadvertent and minor greenwash are still quite prevalent. Green product certifications and labels can be effective tools for facility executives to help ensure they are buying what a manufacturer says they are buying.

What's Being Certified?

For facility executives, the key to using green product certifications and labels as a tool for product selection is identifying the criteria in the certification that are important to them – low VOC emissions, energy efficiency, or high percentage of recycled content, for example. Green certification and labeling bodies use vastly different standards that look at varying product characteristics.

Some certifications only look at one particular criterion, emissions or energy consumption, for example. These certifications are known as single-attribute certifications. Other certifications look at several product characteristics and are known as multiple-attribute certifications. Still others examine a product's raw materials, how it is manufactured, how it performs in the building and what happens to it when its life is over. These are life cycle-based certifications. Some multiple-attribute and life cycle-based certifications also include performance standards — a paint must achieve a minimum square-feet-per-gallon coverage, for example.

The certifications and labels identified throughout this article apply to the broadest range of product types.

While most certifications or labels cover the products themselves, one looks strictly at processes. An ISO (International Organization for Standardization) 14001 certification indicates a company with manufacturing processes and operating procedures focused on environmental responsibility.

“ISO certification is very expensive and time-consuming,” says Elaine Aye, senior design consultant with Green Building Services. “If a company is going through ISO certification and promoting it, then I look at that company as a leader in the industry.”

It is important to note, though, that an ISO 14001 certification does not necessarily mean that the company is producing environmentally responsible products, so it may be necessary to look for other eco-labels to determine the products' level of greenness.

Standards of the Standards

Despite all the differences in the various parts of greenness that are certified by eco-labels, there are still at least three characteristics facility executives should look for in how certifying and labeling bodies develop standards:

- The standards themselves and the process by which the criteria for certification are developed should be open and transparent. Most certification and labeling bodies post this information on their Web sites. The key is that purchasers, without too much effort, should be able to identify what the specific criteria of the standard are and how the standard came into being.
- The standard should be objective and consensus-based with a strong foundation of environmental science. Experts from all over the industry —architects, environmentalists, scientists, facility executives and even manufacturers' representatives — should have an opportunity to provide feedback as the standard is developed. But the final decisions should be made by a true third-party organization with no ties or agenda. Because many certification organizations are nonprofit, they rely on outside funding to maintain operations. Companies with products that stand to be certified by the standard should not be allowed to provide funds during the development of the standard.

- The standard should be stringent enough so that only the upper echelon of products in a certain product category can achieve the certification.

The Whole Picture

It's important to take a closer look at each program label to understand how they are alike and different, especially certification and labeling organizations that certify a wide array of product types.

Even with the stringent criteria these certification and labeling organizations use to certify products, there is still no assurance that using any number of certified products will yield an overall green building. The green certifications are only one piece of the total building puzzle. But when used as part of a progressive, integrated design, products containing green certifications will certainly contribute to the overall environmental responsibility and health of a building.

The value of green certifications and labels in the overall process of product selection depends partly on the extent that the organization values being environmentally responsible. When green is a high priority, facility executives will give more weight to green certified or labeled products, and many are even willing to pay a premium for those products. But even in those organizations, the highest priority is finding the product that will deliver the best performance.

Green Product Certification and Labeling Quick Reference				
Certification or label	Governing organization	What's its focus?	Which products does it cover?	How do products get certified?
Greenguard	Greenguard Environmental Institute	Indoor air quality	Adhesives, appliances, ceilings, cleaning systems, flooring, insulation, office equipment, office furniture, paint, textiles and wallcoverings	Independent labs test product within one week of being manufactured. Product undergoes 96 hour emissions test. From data gleaned from the test, emission levels are projected out several months. Products are subject to annual recertification.
Green Seal	Green Seal	Green Seal Product performance, life-cycle and product-specific features	Chillers, cleaners, paints and coatings, windows and doors	Manufacturer submits a request for certification. Test data on environmental and performance criteria is gathered. The manufacturing facility is visited to check quality control procedures. Products are subject to annual recertification.

Energy Star Label for Products	Environmental Protection Agency	Energy efficiency	Appliances, light commercial HVAC, office equipment, lighting, exit signs, external power adapters, roof products, room air cleaners, transformers, water coolers, windows and doors, skylights	Manufacturers submit data that proves a product meets standards. No need to retest unless a new version or model of the product comes to market.
Environmentally Preferable Products (EPP) , biodegradable, material content, indoor air quality	Scientific Certification Systems	EPP is a multiple-attribute certification with 28 criteria. Separate certifications cover material content, biodegradability and indoor air quality.	The EPP certification applies to carpet face fiber, broadloom and tile and flooring management systems. The single-attribute certifications apply to a variety of product types.	Manufacturers submit an application that documents how they think they meet certification criteria. An SCS engineer performs an audit, assuring that testing was done on a product sample representative of the whole product line. For indoor air quality, modeling is completed, as well.
SmartWood	Forest Stewardship Council	Chain of Custody certification — assures wood comes from certified forests	Any product that uses wood in its manufacturing process	Certification completed by third-party organizations, including SmartWood and SCS.
Green Label, Green Label Plus	Carpet and Rug Institute	Indoor air quality	Carpet, adhesives and cushion materials	Product is tested by an independent laboratory. Products are tested quarterly for total volatile organic compound emissions and annually for 13 specific chemical emissions.

Energy Star

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Energy Star label for products — EPA also has an Energy Star labeling program for buildings — is a self-certification labeling program that focuses on energy efficiency in products ranging from roofing to lighting to exit signs.

To use the Energy Star label, manufacturers must verify that they’ve tested their products to meet an Energy Star standard. The standards usually require products to operate a specified percent

more efficiently than ordinary products. For roofing products, the standard specifies a reflectivity the product must achieve initially and after three years. The Energy Star roofing standard is referenced in LEED for New Construction and LEED for Existing Buildings for the heat islands reduction credit.

“For us, labeling involves an objective criteria,” says Ann Bailey, director of product labeling for Energy Star. “Manufacturers can only use the label if the product performs to those criteria. We’re fundamentally interested in helping buyers easily find products that are more efficient. We’re truly a single-attribute label.”

Energy Star adds one or two product categories a year, says Bailey, but focuses more on updating existing standards.

Greenguard Environmental Institute

A nonprofit organization founded in 2001, the Greenguard Environmental Institute governs the Greenguard certification program. The goal of this single-attribute certification is to certify products that don’t emit harmful chemicals and are therefore conducive to good indoor air quality. The standards for the different product categories — which include adhesives, paints and coatings, and furniture, to name a few — examine the amount of certain chemicals that are off-gassed once a product is installed or put to use in the facility.

“We drew a line in the sand and identified the levels of certain chemicals that can come off a product,” says Henning Bloech, director of communications for Greenguard. “If the product is above that, it won’t be certified. Only about 20 percent of products that are tested will pass right off the bat.” If a manufacturer doesn’t qualify, Greenguard offers audits to help the company replace harsh off-gassing chemicals.

Greenguard strictly regulates how manufacturers can use its certification trademark — one way it helps avoid greenwash. “We make sure that there are no overstatements of what the certification actually means,” says Bloech. “Because Greenguard is an indoor air quality certification, we make sure it doesn’t get misconstrued into a holistically green certification.”

About 40 manufacturers and about 4,000 products — mostly furniture products — are Greenguard-certified.

Green Seal

Green Seal certifies products from chillers to paints and coatings, but the organization is probably best known for GS-37, its cleaning products standard. Founded in 1989, Green Seal is a nonprofit, third-party organization that provides multiple-attribute certifications with life cycle-based criteria and performance standards.

“First and foremost, these products have to perform,” says Mark Petruzzi, Green Seal’s vice president of certification. “But they also have to be environmentally preferable on the life cycle basis. That means looking at raw material extraction, how they’re manufactured, performance,

maintenance issues and end-of-life disposal.”

Green Seal is highly selective. “Green Seal’s goal is to be a leadership standard, so they’ve tried to set the bar where only about 20 percent of manufacturers can achieve it,” says Steve Ashkin, president of the Ashkin Group.

“There have to be a lot of companies that make a product and it has to be unclear which is the best environmental choice,” says Petruzzi. “It means deciding what are the top 20 percent of products in particular categories and hoping more purchasers will buy those products. That will send a clear message to the other 80 percent and result in market change without regulation.”

Several states, LEED for Existing Buildings and several green schools programs reference Green Seal’s GS-37 cleaning products standard. When facility executives are looking for products to fit with these specifications, then, looking for Green Seal-certified products saves a tremendous amount of time. “I love what I do, but not everyone thinks it’s wonderfully fun to peruse an 80-page document on the life cycle of an institutional cleaning product,” Petruzzi says.

Green Seal also has a mutual recognition agreement with a major Canadian green certification authority: the Canadian Environmental Choice program. Products certified by one are automatically certified by the other.

Scientific Certification Systems (SCS)

Founded in 1984 as a for-profit company focused on foods and pesticides, SCS moved into building product certifications in the early 1990s. In addition to several certifications based on single attributes like biodegradability, material content and indoor air quality performance, the company offers a broader certification called Environmentally Preferable Product (EPP). At present, the EPP certification applies to carpet face fiber, broadloom and tile, and flooring management systems, but in the near future will be expanding to other product categories, including adhesives, doors, power generation, paints, wall coverings and furniture.

SCS’s EPP certification is based on the criteria spelled out in Executive Order 13101, which urges federal agencies, and by extension, everyone, to use products that have a lesser effect on human health and the environment. The executive order also lists environmental attributes to look for in products. Products that met those attributes came to be known generically as environmentally preferable products. As part of its environmentally preferable purchasing program, the EPA maintains a database of these products, as well as a list of eco-labels. The generic environmentally preferable product designation is also used as a sort of catch-all for products that are ostensibly green.

SCS, however, molded the attributes in the executive order into specific criteria to form its own EPP standard. That standard is the basis for the actual EPP certification.

That’s the important distinction between the EPA’s use of the phrase for its database, other uses and SCS’s certification. To earn the SCS Environmentally Preferable Product certification, products must be tested and verified to the specific criteria SCS extrapolated from the executive

order.

The standard for SCS's EPP certification is detailed, addressing 28 different attributes. When a product is deemed to have met all the requirements, SCS produces a summary of certification that explains, criterion by criterion, on how the manufacturer met the standard, says Kirsten Richie, director, environmental claims certification.

There are dozens of companies certified under the SCS's single-attribute claims, but only a few so far under its much more rigorous EPP certification.

“The challenge comes from the fact that we're always pushing the envelope,” says Richie. “We are focused on progressive, science-based standards. We're not about certifying the status quo.”

Other Certifications and Labels

- Forest Stewardship Council: Manufacturers that are FSC-certified use wood harvested from FSC-certified forests. The certification — which is actually completed by third-party organizations SCS and SmartWood — verifies the chain of custody of the wood to ensure that it came from a forest operated and harvested under principles of sustainable forestry.
- Carpet and Rug Institute: The Green Label and Green Label Plus programs are single-attribute labels for carpets, carpet adhesives and cushions designed to help facilitate good indoor air quality. Green Label was developed in 1992, and Green Label Plus is an update, requiring products to meet more stringent standards for emissions.

For More Info...

[EPA's database of environmentally preferable products](#) (not to be confused with SCS's Environmentally Preferable Products certification)

[EPA's Final Guidance on Environmentally Preferable Purchasing](#)

[Consumers Union criteria](#) for “what makes a good eco-label”

[Federal Trade Commission Environmental Marketing Guidelines](#)

BEES — [Building for Environmental Economic Sustainability](#) — a free software download that helps purchasers select cost-effective, environmentally preferred products, based on the EPA database.