

Earth-Friendly “Green” Procurement Gains Ground

By Scot Case

Procurement officials have always used their purchasing power to demand lower prices and better services, but now they are also increasingly demanding minimally polluting products from environmentally conscious companies. Led by government and other large institutional purchasers, the green purchasing movement continues to accelerate as more and more organizations try to reduce the environmental and human health impacts associated with every purchase. This market-based approach to addressing environmental challenges has been around for years, but recent developments have made green purchasing even easier and more influential.

Driven by environmental and human health concerns, attempts to reduce long-term costs, or a simple desire to “do the right thing,” more and more government purchasers are protecting human health by buying less-polluting products from less-polluting companies. Purchasers have discovered, for example, that effective cleaning products that pose no human health or environmental threats are available at no additional cost over traditional products. Organizations buying recycled-content paper can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 37 percent, cut solid waste emissions in half, decrease water use by 50 percent, and practically eliminate wood use.¹

Purchasers have discovered some computers are manufactured with less hazardous or fewer materials, are easier to upgrade, and are more energy efficient, making them significantly less expensive to maintain and operate.

Over the past decade, government purchasers across the country have found affordable ways to reduce the human health and environmental impacts of almost any acquisition. They have developed innovative tools to balance price, performance, and environmental considerations for products and services ranging from building and maintenance products to office equipment and fleet vehicles.

Until recently, efforts to buy safer products occurred in relative isolation as each purchasing department struggled to develop unique, local specifications for environmentally preferable products. The process took enormous amounts of time and energy to research the relevant environmental impacts and to identify available products. In an era of declining budgets



To make it easier for purchasers to identify reputable labels, Consumer's Union, publisher of Consumer Reports, compiled a set of recommendations and a database of currently available labels. It is available at: www.eco-labels.org.

and dwindling staffs, this time-intensive approach to green purchasing is not feasible for most purchasing departments.

Two important and related trends, however, are making green purchasing significantly easier and more influential. The first is a growing use of environmental purchasing criteria developed by reputable environmental standard-setting organizations. The second is the increasing number of collaborative efforts among purchasers and environmental experts to establish consistent, effective, and

meaningful purchasing criteria. The combined result of these trends is that safer, affordable, and more environmentally preferable products are available and significantly easier to source.

Environmental Standard Organizations

In the early days of the green purchasing movement, governments around the world established comprehensive environmental standard and labeling programs to identify green products. These programs look at

multiple environmental attributes such as the use of less toxic materials, energy- and water-efficiency, and recycled content rather than focusing on any single attribute.

The U.S. government did not launch a similar effort because of intense industry opposition. Instead, the U.S. government focused on less comprehensive, single-attribute approaches such as the Energy Star label, www.energystar.gov, or the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's list of recycled content products, www.epa.gov/cpg.

Green Tools for the Trade

By Jesse Eaves

The myths are everywhere. Environmental products are inferior in performance and price. One cannot combine the environment and economics if he wishes to stay afloat, let alone make a profit.

Time and again public- and private-sector purchasing officials prove these myths wrong. With hundreds of green product categories across the supply spectrum, purchasers are thinking, buying, and saving "green." Now the tools exist to make "green" purchasing an integral part of the purchasing process.

The majority of purchasing tools instructs purchasers on how to "green" their contracts. Purchasing via contracts is the route through which the federal, state, and local governments purchase the majority of their products and services. Contracts are also the avenue through which purchasers can sway the marketplace to supply even more green products.

The federal government spends more than \$280 billion a year on products and services. State and local governments spend more than \$400 billion. That's one heck of a catalyst for changing the marketplace to provide "green" products.

Some purchasers do not know which products are the most environmentally preferable, let alone what environmental attributes they should factor into their purchasing decisions.

The best part about purchasing "green" products via contracts is that once one finds out what attributes are wanted in a product, bidders will find the product needed and compete for the business. The bidders are out there, waiting for bid requests. They'll supply what is needed with the criteria required to get the job done right.

When the Pentagon needed to build a new parking lot, the facility's contract officers specified that the project be beneficial to the environment. Several bidders told Pentagon officials that an environmentally friendly parking lot was impossible.

However, Pentagon contract officers told bidders if they found environmentally friendly materials for the project, they would receive a price deferential for each environmental attribute they added to the parking lot, including recycled-content asphalt and low levels of Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs).

The Pentagon found a contractor who delivered these products and more to fit the challenge.

The following tools will share what environmental attributes to ask for and what products and services can meet an agency's criteria for price, performance, and environment.

EPA's Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) Homepage: www.epa.gov/oppt/epp

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designed a complete Web site to answer all purchasers' questions about what EPP is and how they can find the best product or service that benefits both human health and the environment. From case studies, to a glossary of environmental purchasing terms, to a complete tool suite that can help purchasers "green" everything from meetings to cafeterias, EPA's EPP Web site can be a purchaser's first stop on the road to purchasing greener products and services.

EPA's Database For Environmentally Preferable Goods and Services: www.epa.gov/oppt/epp/database.htm

Recognizing the value of multi-attribute labels, U.S. non-profit organizations such as Green Seal, www.greenseal.org, and the Forest Stewardship Council, www.fscus.org, began developing comprehensive standards and certifying products. Without federal government endorsement, however, U.S. purchasers were initially hesitant to use them, preferring instead to rely on the more limited single-attribute approaches.

As U.S. purchasers develop a greater understanding of environmental purchasing, they are recognizing the limitations of the single-attribute approach, which, by focusing on a small percentage of the total environmental impacts, makes it easier to overlook significantly safer products. Like their European, Canadian, and Japanese counterparts, U.S. purchasers are embracing the compre-

hensive labels like those developed by Green Seal, Canada's Environmental Choice Program, www.environmentalchoice.com, Global Ecolabeling Network members, www.gen.gr.jp, and other well-established organizations.

Purchasers remain understandably reluctant to buy only certified products because there is a small cost for certification, and purchasers are worried that requiring certification might increase costs or limit small business participation. Purchasers do, however, routinely require vendors to provide evidence demonstrating that products meet environmental standards. As a result, more products are being certified because vendors are deciding that the easiest way to prove compliance is to be certified.

Green Seal, for example, has certified 23 products meeting its institu-

According to the U.S. federal government, environmentally preferable products are "products or services that have a lesser or reduced effect on human health and the environment when compared with competing products or services that serve the same purpose. This comparison may consider raw materials acquisition, production, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, reuse, operation, maintenance, or disposal of the product or service."

Executive Order 13101

tional cleaning standard within the past year, largely because of an increased demand for green cleaning products among government purchasers. In that same period, Green Seal also certified 30 hotels across the

EPA launched the Database for Environmentally Preferable Goods and Services in 1999 in response to customer demand for a one-stop shop for environmental information on products and services that the federal government buys.

The database contains environmental information on more than 600 product categories, as well as more than 130 local, state, and federal contract specifications, 523 product environmental performance standards/guidelines, 25 lists of products identified as "green" by other organizations, and 155 links to additional useful environmental information on products and/or services.

This database will help purchasers buy greener products and services by linking them to:

- Contract language and specifications created and used by federal and state governments and others to buy environmentally preferable products and services.

- Environmental guidelines and standards for specific products.

- Vendor lists of product brands that meet these standards.

- Other useful sources of information on the environmental preferability of products and services (U.S. EPA Environmentally Preferable Purchasing Updates, guidance documents, fact sheets, case studies, and miscellaneous information useful to government purchasers).

Once purchasers or contract writers know what to ask for in a bid or contract by seeing other examples of "green" contracts, they can see vendor lists of who supplies these items, as well as testimonials and case studies from others who successfully procured environmentally preferable products.

For example, Chris Long, the chief of the Facilities Development Staff at EPA's Research Triangle Park facility in

North Carolina says, "I have found that green building products, with [environmental attributes such as] recycled content or low toxicity, are readily available. Often, there is no difference in cost. It's simply a matter of asking."

With the correct knowledge garnered from the database, purchasers will know what to ask for and receive the most environmentally beneficial products and services without breaking the bank.

Center for a New American Dream Procurement Strategies
Web site : www.newdream.org/procure

This Web site will help interested parties track the growing interest in environmentally preferable purchasing. From examples of environmental attributes to sample purchasing policies, the tools on this site will make it easier to identify and buy "green" products and services. The site provides general information about environmentally preferable purchasing and specific information about how state and local governments can reduce the environmental impacts of their purchasing decisions.

While some purchasers shrug off buying products with the environment in mind, it's crucial to remember a very important fact: purchasing does not take place in a vacuum. The products and services you buy can affect everyone around you—from the people who use the products to those who dispose of them. Purchasers are the first line of defense in lowering disposal costs, sustaining the environment, and protecting worker health. Through learning what environmental attributes they can ask for in a product, purchasers today hold the keys to a safer and more sustainable future.

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country that meet the program's green lodging standard. Canada's Environmental Choice Program also reports continued strong interest in its certification program with more than 3,000 certified products.

Interest in certified products is so high that a number of less reputable labels have emerged as vendors with more environmentally harmful products struggle to compete in the green market. Purchasers have quickly learned to avoid standards developed by manufacturers or their trade associations because they tend to be significantly weaker. To make it easier for purchasers to identify reputable labels, Consumer's Union, publisher of Consumer Reports, compiled a set of recommendations and a database of currently available labels. It is available at: www.eco-labels.org.

Collaborative Efforts

One of the most important trends in the green purchasing movement is the increasing collaboration among groups of purchasers and among environmental groups. Purchasers across

the country are working together to issue identical requests for more environmentally preferable products or buying products together as part of more formal purchasing cooperatives.

Environmental groups are also working together to ensure the information they provide purchasers is more consistent. Even more importantly, environmentalists and purchasers are finding constructive ways to work together, which is further consolidating demand behind common environmental standards. This consolidation makes it easier for purchasers to specify safer, more environmentally preferable products. This collaborative effort also helps manufacturers respond to purchasers' demands.

Numerous cooperative purchases for low-polluting, fuel-efficient hybrid-electric vehicles, more environmentally preferable computers, conference support services, and office equipment are now being launched.

A few of the earlier collaborative efforts demonstrate the potential benefits. They include the following:

Cleaning Products: The states of Massachusetts and Minnesota; the city of Santa Monica, CA; King County, WA; and others representing more than \$15 million in annual cleaning product purchases agreed upon common purchasing criteria for buying safer cleaning products. The use of identical criteria makes it easier for each entity to identify products meeting their needs because products approved by one would be acceptable to all. It also eliminates the previous confusion among manufacturers about how to define a safer, more environmentally preferable cleaning product. For additional information, including a project overview, copy of the purchasing criteria, list of products meeting the criteria, and pricing information, visit: www.newdream.org/procure/products/cleaners.html.

Paper: In response to purchasing officials' confusion caused by a barrage of seemingly contradictory recommendations about how to buy more environmentally preferable paper, a group of almost 60 environmental organizations drafted and endorsed *A Common Vision*, a set of paper recommendations that includes purchasing criteria.

In July 2003, the city council in Portland, OR, unanimously endorsed a new paper-purchasing policy, becoming the first organization to adopt many of the *Common Vision* recommendations. It is currently reviewing bids for paper meeting the new purchasing requirements.

For information on the *Common Vision*, visit: www.conservatree.com/paper/Choose/commonvision.shtml.

North American Green Purchasing Initiative (NAGPI) was launched following a 2002 green purchasing conference. NAGPI is a group of environmental non-profits, environmental standard-setting organizations, manufacturers, and purchasing officials interested in further expanding "green" purchasing throughout North America. NAGPI is currently working on ways to coordinate green purchasing standards and tool development, as well as opportunities to promote

Environmental Impacts of Routine Purchases

Every purchase has some environmental impact, as the following examples illustrate:

Σ One ton of traditional office paper requires 98 tons of resources to produce.² Its production also releases 5,700 pounds of climate-changing greenhouse gas emissions, and 2,200 pounds of solid waste.³

Σ Many of the five billion pounds of chemicals used to clean office buildings and schools are linked to cancer, reproductive disorders, respiratory ailments, eye or skin irritation, and other human health issues. They also can adversely affect water quality, plant and animal life, and accumulate in the environment with potentially harmful consequences.⁴

Σ Manufacturing a typical desktop computer creates 139 pounds of waste and 49 pounds of hazardous materials. Producing the six-inch silicon wafer from which computer chips are cut generates 2,840 gallons of wastewater and seven pounds of hazardous waste.⁵

²Liedtke (1993) quoted in Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, "Natural Capitalism," (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1999), p. 50

³White House Office of the Federal Environmental Executive, www.ofee.gov/recycled/calculat.htm

⁴Personal communication with Steve Ashkin, a green cleaning consultant, December 2002

⁵Karliner, Joshua. "The Corporate Planet : Ecology and Politics in the Age of Globalization," Sierra Club Books. November 1997. p. 17.

The Climate Change Difference

By John Polak

Your purchasing decisions can make a difference in addressing more than the health concerns of individuals and the environment. These decisions can also cause market share shifts toward more greenhouse gas-efficient products and services, as well as achieve substantial cost savings.

You have the power to make a difference. Together, we can make this difference incredibly significant. Here's the difference your "green" purchases can make:

■ **Transportation:** If all cars in North America were more efficient by two miles per gallon, we would see a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to close to 10 450-megawatt, coal-fired generating plants.

■ **Paper:** If we collectively purchased 20 million reams of paper made with significant post-consumer, recycled content each year, we could reduce the emission of almost 12,000 tons of greenhouse gases and conserve thousands of trees, which, in turn absorb carbon dioxide. That 12,000 tons would be the equivalent of keeping 3,000 cars off the roads.

■ **Photocopiers:** If we were to look at the difference between purchasing 100,000 of the most energy-efficient photocopiers and purchasing 100,000 non-efficient units, we would see the reduction of emissions by almost 10,000 tons of greenhouse gases per year. This would be the equivalent of 2,500 cars not being used.

■ **Dishwashers:** Purchasing 100,000 energy-efficient dishwashers would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by more than 28,000 tons per year. This would equate to 7,000 cars being kept off the roads.

■ **Showerheads:** Converting 100,000 showerheads to low-flow models would reduce emissions by 250,000 tons per year, as well as conserve more than 30 percent of water used. This translates to 60,000 cars not being driven.

■ **Green Power:** Purchasing 10 billion kilowatt hours of "green" power would reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases by 10 million tons. This would be the equivalent of a 450-megawatt coal plant closing.

Additional resource sites:

EcoLogo certifies products and services that are environmentally preferable. Visit www.environmentalchoice.com.

EcoBuyer assists professional buyers with a variety of resources, including a Climate Change report that gives a complete breakdown of the difference "green" products can make. Visit www.ecobuyer.net.

International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) is the international association of local governments implementing sustainable development. Visit www.iclei.org.

United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) promotes the exchange of information regarding the diverse experiences involving sustainable procurement around the globe. Visit www.uneptie.org/pc/sustain/.

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green purchasing strategies more systematically.

The group is also developing an assessment tool purchasing departments can use to evaluate their "green" purchasing activities. The assessment should be ready by spring, 2004. For information, visit: www.cec.org/programs_projects/trade_enviro_econ/nagpi/www.nagpi.net.

Every movement—from the American independence movement in the 1770s and the civil rights movement in the 1960s to the green purchasing movement of 2000—has three distinct phases. The first is an awareness-raising phase, in which diverse groups of people call attention to a common challenge and debate possible solutions. The second is a consolidation phase, in which people rally behind a common strategy or solution. The third and final phase is a rapid deployment phase, in which the accepted solution permeates throughout the larger community.

The green purchasing movement, after more than a decade in the awareness-raising phase, has begun to move into the consolidation phase. Preferred solutions have emerged and are being adopted by more and more purchasers. Purchasing departments that have not already adopted "green" purchasing protocols are beginning to investigate them more seriously. It appears to be only a matter of time before evaluating environmental impacts will be as routine as considering more traditional price and performance factors. □

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¹Office of the Federal Environmental Executive paper calculator, www.ofee.gov/recycled/cal-index.htm.