"Green" Advertising Claims

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"Green" Advertising Claims: Points to Consider

Like many consumers, you may be interested in buying products that are less harmful to the environment. You've probably seen products with such "green" claims as "environmentally safe," "recyclable," "degradable," or "ozone friendly."

But what do these claims really mean? How can you tell which products really are less harmful to the environment? This fact sheet offers some pointers to help you decide.

Look for environmental claims that are specific.

To evaluate environmental claims, look for product labels with *specific* information about the product or its packaging. For example, if a label says "recycled," check *how much* of the product or packaging is recycled.

A growing number of labels on "recycled" products tell *where* the recycled material comes from. "Post-consumer" material comes from previously used business or consumer products, such as newspapers, plastic bottles, glass containers, or aluminum cans. "Pre-consumer" material, in contrast, is basically manufacturing waste. For example, an envelope manufacturer might recycle the clippings left over when envelopes are cut from paper. These clippings could be made into other paper products instead of being thrown away.

Some products and packages state that they *use less material* in the first place than previous or competing products. See if the claim says exactly what has been reduced, by how much, and compared to what. A claim such as "20 percent less waste" does not tell the whole story. Instead, look for claims such as "20 percent less packaging than our previous package."

Labels with "recyclable" claims mean that these products can be collected and made into useful products. This is relevant to you, however, only if this material is

collected for recycling in your community. Contact your local recycling office, trash hauler, or scrap dealer for this information.

Look for claims that clearly state whether they apply to the product, its packaging, or both. For example, the claim "recycled content" alone may not give you this information.

Be wary of overly broad or vague environmental claims.

Just as specific information about the environmental merits of products can be helpful, overly general or vague claims provide little information to help you make purchasing decisions. Labels with unqualified claims that a product is "environmentally friendly," "eco-safe," or "environmentally safe" have little meaning, for two reasons.

First, all products have *some* environmental impact, though some may have less impact than others. Second, these phrases alone do not provide the specific information needed to compare products and packaging on their environmental merits.

Similarly, claims like "safe in a landfill" or "safe for incineration" provide little help in choosing among products. Most consumer products pose little environmental risk when disposed of in properly designed and operated landfills or incinerators. Disposal safety depends more on how a waste facility is designed and managed than on the characteristics of any single material that is disposed.

Degradable materials will not help save landfill space.

Some products claim to be "degradable." *Biodegradable* materials, like food and leaves, break down and decompose into elements found in nature when exposed to air, moisture, and bacteria or other organisms. *Photodegradable* materials, usually

plastics, disintegrate into smaller pieces when exposed to enough sunlight.

Either way, however, degradation of any material occurs very slowly in landfills, where most garbage is sent. That's because modern landfills are designed, according to law, to minimize the entry of sunlight, air, and moisture into the landfill. This helps to prevent pollutants from the garbage from entering the air and drinking water supplies, but also greatly slows decomposition. Even organic materials like paper and food may take decades to decompose in a landfill.

In contrast to landfills, composting takes advantage of degradability. It turns degradable materials into usable compost—humus-like material that enriches the soil and returns nutrients to the earth. Some people compost yard trimmings and some food scraps in their back yards. Many communities collect leaves, grass, and other yard trimmings for composting. A very small number of communities are experimenting with large-scale composting of all the organic materials in collected garbage. When you see a "compostable" claim on a product or package, check to be sure you have access in your community to a facility that accepts that material for composting.

Cleaning products like detergents and shampoos often display "biodegradable" claims. In general, most of these products *will* degrade in wastewater systems—which has been true for years.

Check "ozone friendly" and "CFC-free" claims carefully.

FCs are chemical substances called chlorofluorocarbons that can deplete the earth's protective ozone layer. They are used to provide coolant in air conditioners and refrigerators, to clean electronic parts, and to make certain plastic foam products. In 1978, CFCs were banned for use as propellants in nearly all consumer aerosol products.

HCFCs, or hydrochlorofluorocarbons, are sometimes used as substitutes for CFCs. While HCFCs are much less damaging to the ozone layer than CFCs, they still

cause some ozone depletion and are thus not safe for the ozone layer.

By law, CFCs, HCFCs, and other ozone-depleting substances are being phased out in all products and manufacturing processes over the next several years. Beginning in 1993, products containing or made with the most harmful ozone-depleting substances must be labeled to indicate this. Until then, you may not be able to tell from the label whether a product contains or is made with an ozone-depleting substance unless you contact the manufacturer.

Think about ground level ozone, too.

Don't confuse the ozone layer with ozone at the ground level. The ozone layer in the upper atmosphere is needed to prevent the sun's harmful radiation from reaching the earth. When ozone develops at the ground level, it forms smog, which can cause serious breathing problems.

One factor contributing to the formation of ground level ozone, or smog, is the release of substances called VOCs, or volatile organic compounds. Common VOC substances are alcohols, butane, propane, and isobutane. Although emissions from cars and factories are the major source of VOC releases to the environment, some consumer products also contribute to the problem. Products such as household cleaning products, floor polishes, charcoal lighter fluid, windshield washer fluid, and hair styling spray, gel, and mousse—whether in aerosol cans or spray pumps—may contain VOCs.

Did you know...

The Federal Trade Commission recently issued guides, with the cooperation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Office of Consumer Affairs, for manufacturers and others who wish to make claims about the environmental features of products. These guides explain various circumstances in which the Federal Trade Commission considers use of "green" advertising claims to be misleading.

For More Information

Contact the Environmental Protection Agency:

If you would like information about EPA's publications on source reduction, recycling, and other waste management issues (including "The Consumer's Handbook for Reducing Solid Waste"), call the RCRA Hotline at 800-424-9346. (In the Washington, DC, area, call 703-920-9810.) If you would like information about EPA's publications on air pollution issues, call the National Air Toxics Information Clearinghouse at 919-541-0850.

Contact the Federal Trade Commission:

If you have questions or concerns about environmental advertising claims, write: Correspondence Branch, Federal Trade Commission, Washington, DC 20580, or call 202-326-2222. If you would like a copy of the "Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims," call 202-326-3753.

Contact the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs:

If you would like more information about "green" advertising claims and other consumer topics that are included in the "Consumer's Resource Handbook," a free self-help guide listing more than 2,000 consumer contacts, write: Handbook, Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, CO 81009.