

Peeling Back the ECO-LABEL

By Jeff Stephens

In recent years, there's been a proliferation of labels for building products said to be produced in an environmentally and socially responsible manner. The term "eco-label" is any label, seal or logo used to give purchasers, including architects, designers and builders, an assurance about the environmental characteristics or production methods of the product used to improve the performance of the building envelope. But not all eco-labels are the same, and this article will help you better understand the process for awarding, or certifying, products for certain attributes.

CAVEAT EMPTOR

Certification has been around for hundreds of years as a way of ensuring accurate representation of products between trading partners, such as weights and measures (e.g., gold, silver, iron ore) and quality (e.g., silk, cotton, tea, coffee, wine, porcelain, etc.). Certifications were performed by trusted allies—individuals and companies—who were strategically located to monitor the activities of the producers and shippers.

In the 1890s, insurance companies banded together to address the need for product safety requirements for the growing electrical and mechanical product marketplace. In 1894, Underwriters' Laboratory (UL) Inc., a not-for-profit company, was formed and dedicated to product safety testing and certification. More than 17 billion UL marks are applied to products each year. More than 66,000 manufacturers produced UL certified products in 2002. With UL, the certification industry was born.

HOSTING A CERTIFICATION PARTY

When deciphering eco-labels, it's important to think about who's "hosting" the party. Certification generally can be broken down into first, second and third parties.

First-party certification is a declaration of an environmental claim that is made without independence by manufacturers, importers, distributors, retailers or anyone else likely to benefit from such a claim. This scenario generally does not allow outsiders into the process of generating rules or communicating compliance. There are obvious benefits to first-party certification, including preserving the company's discretion and allowing it to work with relative efficiency (i.e., outsiders need not poke around in the company's business practices).

This is not to say manufacturers are making nefarious first-party claims. In fact, most manufacturers are truthful because they have too much at risk by making outright bogus

too much at risk by making outright bogus claims. The confusion for architects, designers and builders occurs when manufacturers take modest claims and stretch them to epic proportions. A product containing 5 percent postindustrial recycled content is great, but hyped-up claims of being an environmentally preferable product should be rejected.

The best guide for first-party labeling information is ISO 14021, "Environmental Labels and Declarations—Self-declared Environmental Claims." To further complicate matters, self-declared labels also are called Type II labels. Leave it to an international standards setting body to complicate matters; however, ISO 14021 makes it clear that self-declared eco-labels "... shall only be considered verifiable if such verification can be made without access to confidential business information." If the manufacturer won't provide proof, then the claim should be treated as spurious.

Second-party certification is an assessment performed under the auspices of an interested party, such as a vendor or trade association. Typically, industry members work together to address market demands or preclude regulatory oversights. Programs may address single attribute certification, such as the Composite Panel Association's formaldehyde emission certification or the Carpet and Rug Institute's Green Label Plus program for emission of volatile organic chemicals, to complex multiple attribute programs, such as the American Forest and Paper Association's Sustainable Forestry Initiative. These programs shouldn't be counted out simply because they have connections to industry. A lot of positive environmental improvements have been made. Once again, the answer is to "trust, but verify."

The holy grail of certification may just be third-party certification. As defined by ISO, a third-party is "... a person or body that is

recognized as being independent of the parties involved, as concerns the issue in question." In plain speak, that means they won't benefit financially, directly or indirectly by awarding (or denying) certification. There can be no direct payments, shares, loans, grants, ties to board members, etc.

The third-party is responsible for confirming the validity of a claim using specific predetermined criteria and procedures with assurance of data reliability. Examples include UL, Scientific Certification Systems, Terra Choice, Bureau Veritas, Smartwood and others. Operating guidelines for these certifiers are set forth in ISO 65 (products) and ISO 67 (services). And as we learned during the Houston-based Enron period, there should be no mixing of certification and other services (e.g., training, consulting) for certification clients that may blur objectivity. There also should be transparency of standards and certification processes.

GOVERNMENT WATCHDOGS

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Act prohibits deceptive acts or practices, including deceptive representations in advertising, labeling, product inserts, catalogs and sales presentations. FTC, with cooperation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, issued guidelines to help companies ensure their green claims don't run afoul of the law. FTC's Guides for the

Use of Environmental Marketing Claims explain how the FTC Act is enforced when it comes to environmental claims. The guides provide a framework for the use of environmental advertising and labeling claims in the marketplace and state that:

- Claims should be sufficiently clear and prominent to prevent deception.
- Claims should make clear whether they apply to a product, the package or a

component of either.

- Claims should not overstate an environmental attribute or benefit expressly or by implication.
- Comparative claims should be presented in a manner that is sufficiently clear to avoid consumer deception.

GETTING FAMILIAR WITH ECO-TAGS

Now that we're clear about the types of certification and role of federal overseers, it's time to learn more about specific programs. But first, it's important to better understand environmental preferable products because they're most applicable to the building community.

According to Executive Order 13101, signed by President Clinton in September 1998, environmentally preferable products are "products and services [that] have a lesser or reduced effect on human health and the environment when compared to other products and services that serve the same purpose." The comparison may consider raw materials acquisition, production, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, reuse, operation, maintenance, or disposal of the product or service.

Tucked away at www.eppbuildingproducts.org/about/research.html is a treasure trove of information about eco-labels and their applicability for building products. Best of all, it's less than one year old! Despite the mundane title—*Research Report on Programs and Resources Relevant to the DSA EPP Database Project*—the document examines several dozen eco-label programs and initiatives.

In late 2003, the California Department of General Services, Division of State Architect (DSA) launched the development of a first-of-its-kind database of environmentally preferred products (EPP) available for school construction projects. In preparation for the development of EPP standards, the team analyzed a wide range of existing programs, initiatives and published resources relating to EPP specification and procurement including:

- Forest Stewardship Council
- Sustainable Forestry Initiative
- GreenBlue
- MTS Sustainable Textile Standard
- Scientific Certification Systems
- GreenGuard
- ENERGY STAR

- Green Seal
- Blue Angel
- Nordic Swan
- Environmental Choice
- Ecomark

The team will use this background research to develop a prioritized list of building product categories based on dollars spent and potential for environmental improvement. The following draft specifications are in process:

- Composite panel
- Gypsum wallboard
- Fiber-based insulation
- Adhesives and sealants
- Paint
- Carpet
- Acoustical ceiling tile
- Resilient flooring
- Finish wall panels
- Casework/cabinetry

It's anticipated 20 to 25 product categories will be created within the scope of the initial effort. Once completed, the database will be posted at www.eppbuilding

products.org and accessible to everyone, free of charge.

Not to be overlooked is the highly respected Consumers Union, the same organization that brings us *Consumer Reports*. This testing and evaluation group has created www.eco-labels.org, a Web site that evaluates the truthfulness and usefulness of nearly 100 eco-labels. The Web site was created through a grant in 2002 from the Ford Foundation and includes categories, such as cleaning products, food, personal hygiene products and wood. The labels evaluated may be more useful to the average consumer seeking information about specific eco-labels than architects, designers and builders looking for products, but it's a great resource.

S.T.O.P. AND THINK ABOUT ECO-TAGS

Armed with research reports and the Web, architects, designers and builders should feel fairly confident in their ability to separate fact from fiction. Before making product deci-

sions based on an eco-label, remember to S.T.O.P. and think. Determine whether the process was:

Science-based:

Are the results/decisions reproducible by others using the same standard?

Transparent:

Are the standards and process for awarding certification transparent and open for examination?

Objective:

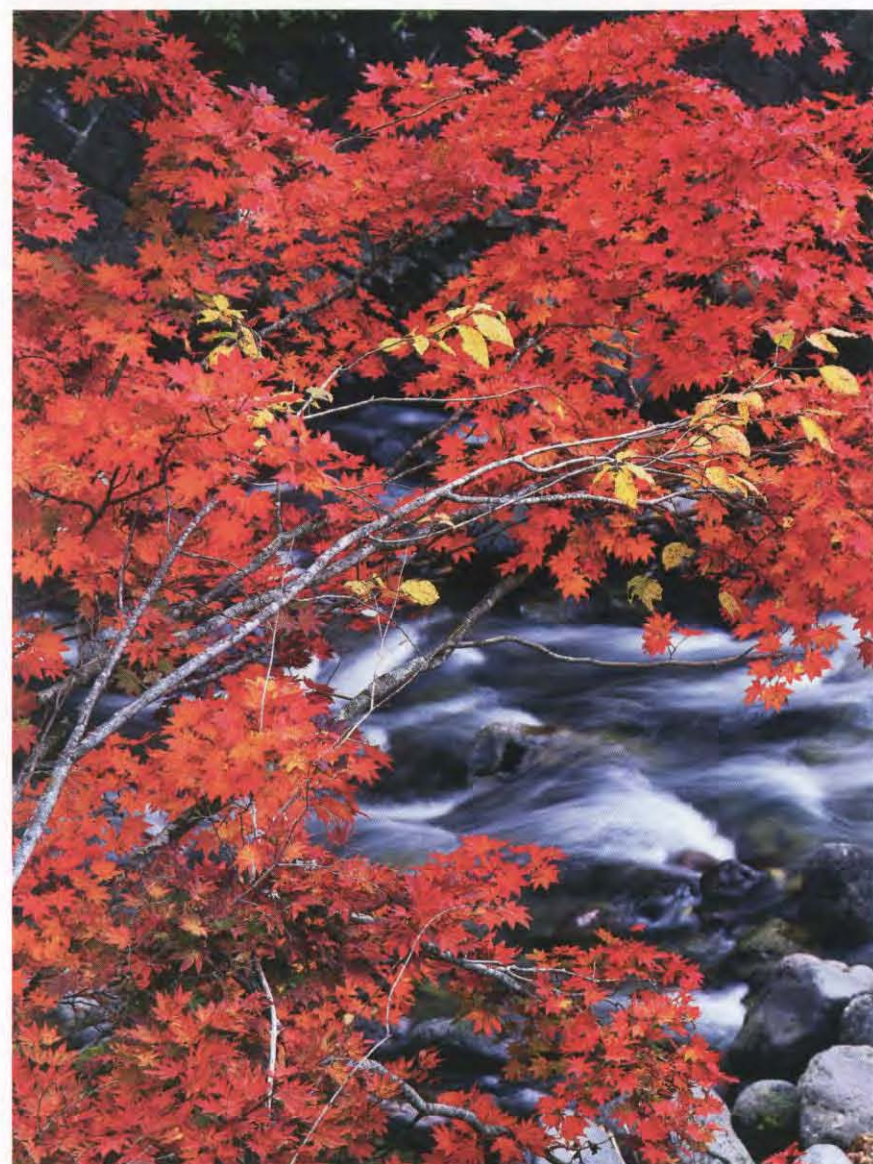
Is the certification body free of conflict?

Progressive:

Does the standard advance industry practices or simply reward business as usual?

Together, we can improve the building envelope one eco-label at a time. ☺

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