

Carbon Labelling Could Fill Information Vacuum

Ingredient Lists Often Incomplete

By Cynthia Schultz

PRODUCT INGREDIENTS are not always easy to identify and distributors may not be able to answer questions or provide assurances for customers with green purchasing or green procurement policies. A Toronto property owner recently encountered that dilemma upon the opening of a new daycare centre for building tenants.

In considering products for the centre's washrooms and food service area, managers were wary of an ingredient that has been linked to respiratory illness for some children, but is also known to be found in green-certified cleaning chemicals. They also wanted to source locally manufactured products, which would entail fewer greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions than products shipped from the United States or Mexico.

Product labels provided few clues. They provided only a partial list of ingredients, and only potentially hazardous ingredients were noted on the accompanying material safety data sheets (MSDS). The labels listed the manufacturer's head office address but did not indicate the manufacturing location.

This isn't necessarily malfeasance since manufacturers have historically affixed labels to products voluntarily. However, calls are increasing for a standardized labelling program that would list all product ingredients and GHG emission information.

Three types of labels are now under consideration:

Low-Carbon Seal: This would be awarded to the most carbon-efficient items within a product category. Consumers would likely be able to grasp the concept easily, but this approach would not allow for comparisons between product categories – i.e. they could not determine whether a certain candy bar is more or less carbon-efficient than a particular bag of chips.

Carbon Score: All labeled goods would have a score that is easily comparable across products and brands. However, carbon scores may be better suited for a measurement methodology that relies more heavily on actual company data than it does on national averages.

Carbon Rating: This would be a tiered approach much like European energy labels. For example, a low-carbon product would score five stars, whereas a high-carbon product would rate only one star. This allows comparisons among brands.

Beyond merely selecting environmentally responsible products, purchasers increasingly want to ensure that the manufacturer of the product or provider of the service operate their facilities and consume resources in an environmentally responsible way. Some programs have already been established to help determine the volume of GHG emitted by a product

during its entire life cycle, from the raw materials used in the product and its manufacture, to packaging and transport, and then its eventual disposal.

So-called sustainable dashboards can help facility managers decipher an assortment of information, providing accurate measurements of such things as fuel, electricity and water consumption. The resulting tallies, in essence, are the building's ingredient and carbon label – information that tenants increasingly ask for.

Carbon labelling isn't going to sway every purchaser. Looking to the food labelling example, it's clear that many consumers still select fast food even when they are made aware of how many calories or how much cholesterol it may contain. Yet, study results published in the *American Journal of Public Health* also reveal that consumers who take the time to read labels typically select those products that have fewer calories.

In a building product scenario, it seems likely that knowledgeable consumers will check the ingredient list and factor that into their purchasing decisions. ■■

Cynthia Schultz is Chief Operating Officer of Sustainable Dashboard Tools, LLC, an on-line software system for measuring natural resources consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. For more information, see the web site at www.green2sustainable.com.

