



Green Certification: The Process

BY DAWN SHOEMAKER

As Green Cleaning and environmental concerns continue to sweep the industry, manufacturers, distributors and end-users are hearing more and more about the importance of selecting products that are “Green certified.” But still, many are unsure just what that term means or the process involved in achieving this status. This is true not only for many in the Jan/San industry, but for building occupants and the general public who will benefit most from the use of these environmentally-preferable products.

The two North American entities most involved in certifying products, including professional cleaning chemicals, are the Environmental Choice Program^M Ottawa, Canada and Green Seal[®], Washington, D.C. These “sister” organizations have reciprocal agreements, recognizing (in most cases) each other’s testing criteria, evaluations and results.

An education session

Kevin Gallagher is vice-president of marketing for the Environmental Choice Program (ECP). The organization evaluates the products of a number of leading Jan/San manufacturers. Because some people may not be as familiar with the Environmental Choice Program as they are Green Seal, Gallagher recently shed light on his organization’s functions.

“ECP was started in 1988 as part of Canada’s ‘eco-labeling’ program, developed to provide incentives for manufacturers and distributors to produce and sell environmentally-preferable products and also, to help end-users better identify these products,” he says. “Just like Green Seal, we test and certify if a product is environmentally-preferable. If so, we allow the manufacturer to place our ‘EcoLogo’ symbol on the product.”

But what exactly does that certification mean? “It means that we have evaluated a product and found it to meet specific product standards and criteria,” Gallagher notes. In general, to obtain the EcoLogo, the product must: Result in a

reduced impact on the environment and people safety (workers and building occupants) through certification of cleaning chemicals that are readily biodegradable and non-toxic; Be comparable in performance to conventional cleaning products used for the same or similar purpose; Be cost competitive; Manufactured not to include endocrine disruptors or carcinogens; Not contain hazardous by-products; Have packaging that is comprised of recycled materials and is recyclable; Meet applicable safety standards for product use.

In addition, according to Gallagher, the process involves an evaluation of the entire life-cycle of a product — from development, manufacture, transportation to distributor, and finally, how the product is eventually disposed of. “We have established very high certification standards for products, and often it means that only a small percentage of products in any specific product category can be certified. We are doing this because we want those manufacturers that have passed our verifying procedure to become leaders in their industries and encourage other manufacturers to follow suit.”

Getting certified

Once a manufacturer deems a product to be ready for certification, a relatively simple two-step process begins. First, an application must be presented where the manufacturer must indicate why the product should be considered environmentally-preferable. “Then the application asks which product category(ies) best describes the item. For instance, if it is a Jan/San product, we have four categories: hard surface cleaners; floor care products; carpet and upholstery chemicals; and hand cleaners. Once this is done, the second step involves a bench audit and then a site audit,” notes Gallagher. Products that don’t fit into the aforementioned categories can still be tested and evaluated under a “panel review process.”



Putting Certification on the Spot

Kevin Gallagher offers additional insight to some frequently asked questions about the certification process:

Q. How long does the entire process take?

It normally takes about two weeks. But this depends a lot on the manufacturer. If they have all of their paperwork in place, the lab results are clear and meet our criteria and we can schedule a site audit relatively quickly, it can even take less than a week.

Q. What are the costs involved?

ECP's charges for verification and auditing run from \$1,250 to \$3,200 (US). It all depends on the type of product being evaluated, the thoroughness of the laboratory testing and the information provided by the manufacturer. Also, we charge per category, not per product. This means if a manufacturer has five floor care products it wants tested, we charge just the one fee for testing all five products and not a fee for each individual product. There is also a licensing agreement and a fee between ECP and the manufacturers. The licensing agreement basically states that the manufacturer will stay in compliance with the criteria and will allow us to do unannounced surveillance audits, which we normally do within the first 12 to 18 months after certification. The licensing fee is six cents for the first one million dollars of products sold or \$6,000. Thereafter, it is one cent for every product sold or an additional \$1,000.

Q. What happens after certification?

Once certified, we do a re-evaluation annually to make sure the products are still compliant. In addition, every three to four years, we reconsider our own standards and criteria. Usually this means the standards are brought up a notch or two, meaning manufacturers must then meet more stringent guidelines.

During the second step of the process, an audit is involved for future evaluation. "We depend on accredited, third-party testing laboratories to do much of the product testing," informs Gallagher. "The manufacturer selects a recognized laboratory to verify the chemical's ingredients, that it meets specific ISO (International Organization for Standardization) and quality control standards and that it also meets the compliance standards and criteria we have established. The manufacturer submits these reports to ECP, along with MSDS sheets and any other related materials. If this is successful, we then do a site audit. This audit essentially confirms everything the laboratory has provided us."

An important aspect of the site audit is tracing the product back to the day it was manufactured. "Once the bench and site audits are conducted, and if the product passes our evaluation, it becomes ECP certified and can bear the EcoLogo seal."

After years of resistance, it appears that these products are becoming commonplace. "Many traditional products have been associated with allergies, asthma and other ailments. Products that do not cause these problems, but also are safer, is important and significant," Gallagher says.

Studies also indicate that when environmentally preferable cleaning products are used along with Green Cleaning and other practices, other health problems may dissipate, worker productivity climbs, testing performance in schools improves and company workmen's compensation liability claims decrease. These two independent certification entities are performing a vital role, helping to verify that the products used in cleaning are indeed Green, come from sustainable sources and are helping to protect our environment — and our people. **M/S**

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