

## **Green-Certified Disinfectants**

By Mike Sawchuk

Although Green cleaning and the use of environmentally preferable cleaning products have become almost commonplace in schools and universities around North America, we may forget that their adoption has actually been a relatively slow process. For one reason, some early Green products tended to be more costly and did not perform as well as conventional products. However, those problems have essentially been resolved.

In many ways, what has been a bigger obstacle is the assurance for consumers that a product that calls itself Green is really Green. There have been cases where some manufacturers “self-declared” a product Green that we learned later was really not protective to health or the environment. In some cases this was because the science, standards, and technology to verify how environmentally responsible a product was simply did not exist. In other instances, the manufacturer may have just wanted to take advantage of a marketing opportunity.

However, the certification process, honored and recognized

throughout the cleaning industry and by organizations such as Green Seal<sup>®</sup> and EcoLogo<sup>™</sup>, has eliminated this obstacle as well. The “guesswork” has been removed because these independent organizations now certify whether a product is healthier for cleaning workers, building occupants, and the environment.

Certification has also helped the manufacturers that make these products as well as the distributors who market them. With certification, the parameters are set. The manufacturers know what ingredients they can and cannot use to make a Green product, and distributors know that the certified, environmentally preferable products they sell have been evaluated and are indeed Green.

This has worked well with all kinds of cleaning products and chemicals, from window cleaners to floor strippers, except for one: disinfectants, which are used not only in medical centers but also educational facilities. Currently, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) prohibits manufacturers or distributors from promoting, labeling, or marketing these products as “Green certified” to U.S. customers. The EPA believes that Federal Insecticide,

Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) registration is sufficient assurance of a product's safety and effectiveness and that any additional claims may be misleading.

Despite the EPA's conclusion, some in the professional cleaning industry as well as school and other facility managers question this. They believe that scientific data clearly demonstrate that many of the environmentally responsible disinfectants that perform as well as FIFRA-registered disinfectants and meet all of FIFRA's requirements are less harmful to human health and the environment than some conventional products.

This does not by any means imply that FIFRA-registered products are unsafe. It just acknowledges that some disinfectants have added benefits. In other parts of the world, disinfectants that are EPA-registered in the United States are marketed as Green certified, bearing the logo of the certification organization, and many facilities select these products not only because they meet their country's guidelines but because they are Green-certified as well.

## **FIFRA Background**

FIFRA was originally passed in 1947 and has been amended several times over the decades. The act authorizes the EPA to regulate the manufacture, distribution, sale, and use of insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, rodenticides, and antimicrobials used in the United States.

The EPA can regulate disinfectant use through labeling, packaging, composition, and disposal. As an added protective measure, the EPA also has the authority to suspend or cancel registration of a disinfectant should new information show that continued use of the product would pose unreasonable risks, including risks related to inappropriate labeling of a product.

All disinfectants sold in the United States and used in health-care, educational, and similar facilities have an EPA registration on the label along with product information. The labels also include key ingredients and list bacterial/disinfection activity, which indicates what organisms the product can eliminate when used properly.

## **What Does This Mean for Schools and Universities**

Many health-care administrators are actively trying to Green their facilities by selecting Green-certified cleaning chemicals and products. Although registration by FIFRA warrants that a product has met the EPA's environmental and health guidelines and standards, it does not necessarily mean that additional precautions have been taken such as using safer ingredients, packaging the product to reduce packaging volume and customer exposure, and ensuring the product meets additional performance, efficacy, human health and safety, and environmental requirements.

Just as many consumers want automobiles that exceed the safety features required by law, many facility managers are asking for disinfectants with additional safety features above and beyond those established by the EPA.

So where does this leave the cleaning industry and the health and school administrators in the United States? First of all, we must continue to select disinfectants that meet all legal requirements and are EPA registered. At the same time, many in the professional cleaning industry are working with the EPA, hopeful that the organization will begin to

understand that many even safer disinfectants are available and that end customers are now asking for them.

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