

ENVIRONMENT | What the logos really mean

IS IT TOO EASY BEING 'GREEN'?

Know your labels: Your guide to sorting through the often-confusing world of product claims.

By KATE BEEM
Special to The Star

With the Gulf of Mexico oil spill heavy on minds everywhere these days, taking care of the environment seems even more important.

It's all a matter of choice, from deciding whether to throw away or recycle that cardboard cereal box to what ends up in your grocery cart.

And in the cleaning aisle at the local market, plenty of products sport enviro-labels touting their safety to the environment and those living in it. Judging from the number of logos with the word "green" in them, it's pretty easy to buy products that not only leave your home clean and shiny but that also help Mother Nature.

Or is it? Merely slapping an eye-catching green logo on a product does not ensure its environmental worthiness, experts say. That's true in part because there are few labeling requirements for manufacturers of cleaning products. So anyone can call a product "green" without having to prove it is, says Dee Ferguson, owner of A Green Way Home Cleaning in Kansas City.

"You have to be very, very careful" not to fall prey to the sales gimmick, says Ferguson, who uses only non-toxic cleaning products that list 100 percent of ingredients on the label.

And unlike organic food claims, which can be certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, claims of environmental safety aren't regulated yet, says Urvashi Rangan, director of technical policy for Consumers Union, which publishes Consumer Reports and several offshoot publications.

"Just because it says 'pure,' what does 'pure' mean?" Rangan says.

That's not to say all green labels are meaningless. Many do tell consumers that the product does what it purports to do — keep harmful toxins out of homes and the environment. It's just a matter of knowing who's making the claim.

Generally, the most reliable green label claims are certified by third-party groups with no vested interest in the product's success, Rangan says. Third parties could be trade groups that hired another independent agency to test a product or a fully independent group whose goal is making the environment cleaner.

When products receive certification from these groups, they earn the right to sport special logos, providing consumers some level of assurance that what they're selling does what they say it does, Rangan says.

GreenerChoices.org, a website published by Consumers Union, evaluates green labels based on whether the labels are meaningful and verifiable; consistent from product to product; and the certifier is forthright about its motives.

Meanwhile, consumer groups continue pushing manufacturers and the government to require full disclosure of ingredients, and some manufacturers are moving that way, either listing ingredients on their labels or online, she says.

Kate Beem is a freelance writer in Independence.



FLOORSCORE

Another Scientific Certification Systems label, indicating that hard-surface flooring products — including linoleum and hardwood — and adhesive products comply with rigorous indoor air-quality emissions requirements, including low levels of volatile organic compounds, or VOCs.



U.S. GREEN BUILDING COUNCIL

Companies that use this label comply with the nonprofit group's sustainability requirements for construction.



CERTIFIED BIODEGRADABLE

This logo is offered by Scientific Certification Systems, a neutral third-party group that evaluates products' claims of environmental sustainability and stewardship, as well as claims of food quality, safety and purity. You can find this label on biodegradable soaps, detergents and cleaners. By awarding use of this label, SCS verifies that the product doesn't contain phosphates, will biodegrade when used as directed and will not be toxic in water.



GREEN SEAL

You'll find the Green Seal logo on general purpose cleaners, carpet and rug cleaners, glass and window cleaners as well as toilet paper, paper towels and newsprint. Green Seal is an independent certifying organization that has developed standards for evaluating the environmental claims of products, including its impact from manufacturing, use and disposal.



GREENSURE

Found on Sherwin-Williams products, this label on paint or stain means the company assures consumers the product is environmentally responsible, a company spokesman said. Sherwin-Williams claims its GreenSure products are durable, require fewer coats of paint and have low VOCs.



GREENCHECK

Wearing the GreenCheck logo means the Sierra Club has determined the manufacturer of the product makes a concerted effort at sustainability. The GreenCheck seal also can be award to businesses that work to leave little impact on the environment.



GREEN SHIELD CERTIFIED

Pest management businesses that practice integrated pest management use this logo. This form of pest control reduces or eliminates the use of pesticides.



INDOOR ADVANTAGE

This SCS label ensures that furniture, wall coverings, paints, cleaners and adhesives don't contain high levels of harmful chemical emissions.



ECOLOGO

This label comes out of Canada but is recognized worldwide. The third-party certifier was established by the Canadian government in the late 1980s and verifies the environmental claims of a wide variety of products, from cleaners to building materials to furniture.



GREENGUARD

This logo comes from the Greenguard Environmental Institute, an industry group. It can be found on building products, such as hardwood flooring, tile, cabinets, air filters and furniture.

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TIPS FOR SELECTING GREEN CLEANING PRODUCTS

- Choose a product that minimizes exposure to concentrates.
 - Make sure the packaging is recyclable.
 - Avoid flammable substances.
 - Avoid products with added dyes and fragrances.
 - Seek products with little or no volatile organic compounds.
- Source: Environmental Protection Agency