

Buyers beware of products termed 'environmentally friendly'

One of the most "environmentally-friendly" actions Ontario consumers can take is to find out what that term really means, experts say.

What are "green" products? Is that expensive "natural" cleaning powder the best environmental choice or would it make more sense all round to use baking soda? For that matter, is the expensive cleanser really nothing more than baking soda? What's organic? Is recyclable better than reusable; cotton better than synthetics?

These are all questions consumers, business and government have to answer together as environmental conservation shapes up as the issue of the nineties, say representatives of the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR).

The seemingly harmless term "environmentally friendly" gets a varied response from some specialists in the field. There are, they say, few products that are actually beneficial to the environment, as the friendly buzz-word implies. "Environmentally neutral" or "environmentally less harmful" are better received. That latter term may not win any marketing awards, but environmentalists agree it is generally the most accurate description.

"Shoppers have to look beyond healthy-sounding product names, dreamed up by marketing departments, for explanations of why a particular item is better for the environment than others," says Carolyn Lentz, MCCR's consumer-education specialist.

"They can use purchasing power to persuade manufacturers and retailers to act responsibly by providing adequate information about their products. And government can help by establishing guidelines, encouraging disclosure and passing laws if necessary."

This is already taking place in some fields.

National standards are currently being developed for a number of consumer products through the Environmental Choice program, established by Environment Canada.

The program is designed to help shoppers identify products considered "good environmental choices" through the use of a certification symbol, called the Ecol-

ogo. The symbol consists of three birds nestled together in the shape of a maple leaf.

"Any product which is made, used or disposed of in a way that causes significantly less harm to the environment than other similar products could be considered a good environmental choice," program representatives say. "A brief statement of the reason why a product has been certified will accompany the Ecologo on the package label."

With the assistance of the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) and input from industry and the public, the program board makes recommendations to the Minister of the Environment

about criteria for certification of products within certain categories.

Since the Environmental Choice program started nearly two years ago, criteria have been established for 10 types of products. They include re-refined lubricating oil, construction materials made from wood-based cellulose fibre, products made from recycled plastic and zinc-air batteries.

Also included are low-pollution water-based paint, fine paper, newsprint and miscellaneous products from recycled paper, cloth diapers and home ventilators using heat recovery.

Information about the program

is available from Environmental Choice, 107 Sparks Street, 2nd Floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H3.

"We're going to see more and more 'green-product' guidelines set by industry, government and consumer groups as time goes on," says Lentz of MCCR. "However, even in future, you'll have to be prepared to ask a lot of questions, because there will always be grey areas. Even scientists don't always agree on the best choice."

Many products marketed as good environmental alternatives are also labelled with a supporting explanation for that claim. For example, a detergent might be labelled "phosphate-free" or sta-

tionery could be "made from recycled paper." Consumers should look for this kind of supporting statement, Lentz says.

"That way you have some reassurance that the green product claim has some basis. There may not be a legal definition of terms like green or environmentally-safe, but manufacturers can't claim a product is phosphate-free if it's not. Of course, if you don't know that phosphates are harmful, none of this helps. You'll still have to educate yourself about environmental issues if you want to be sure you're helping, instead of being content with the assurances of a marketing department."

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