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Area businesses showing green leadership

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

No matter how much we do individually to go green, we can always use a little help.

And who can help us the most? The companies that make and sell the products we buy.

Here, we give gold stars to five companies, all with Northwest connections, that have undertaken ambitious efforts to reduce toxics, prevent waste, minimize global warming impacts and/or provide recycling options for products and packaging.

PCC

www.pccnaturalmarkets.com

In 1961, when 15 local families incorporated their food-buying club into Puget Consumer Cooperative, natural foods weren't their main focus. Today, this chain of eight grocery stores in King County goes by the name PCC Natural Markets.

Organic and locally produced products share the spotlight at PCC. Through its product inventory choices and public education, PCC also addresses a wide spectrum of environmental and health issues, including genetically modified foods, irradiated foods, sustainable fishing practices, and antibiotics and hormones in livestock.

On Oct. 1, PCC became one of the first grocery chains in the nation to stop using plastic shopping bags. PCC offers its customers two types of reusable shopping bags, both at a low wholesale price.

Ikea

www.ikea.com

The Sweden-based furniture retail chain encompasses more than 250 stores in 34 countries. Its Renton store has been a regional destination since it opened in 1994 as the first owner-operated Ikea in North America.

Ikea is believed to be the first and only major national retailer that accepts compact fluorescent light bulbs from customers for recycling at no charge. Because of the toxic mercury in these bulbs, other retailers also need to step up and start collecting them for recycling, to keep them out of landfills.

Ikea's Renton store additionally accepts all household batteries from customers for recycling, again with no fee.

The company aims to use only sustainably harvested wood in its products. And like PCC, Ikea offers its customers a durable shopping bag at cost.

Even more notably, Ikea's U.S. stores recently adopted the European model of charging customers five cents for each plastic bag they use. Ikea will donate the first-year proceeds from these bag sales — several thousand dollars from the Renton store alone — to the conservation group American Forests.

Napier Environmental Technologies

www.biowash.com

Few Seattle-area residents have heard of this company, which produces cleaning and staining products for outdoor decks and wood restoration. Napier makes all its products at its headquarters a few miles over the border in Delta, B.C. Bio-Wash, its main consumer brand, is sold at Dunn Lumber, the Environmental Home Center and other local stores.

Napier has replaced methylene chloride, a toxic chemical used in paint-stripping products, with the safer, water-based SARA (Selective Adhesion Release Agent) technology.

With the ambitious goal of becoming "the global leader in the supply of environmentally friendly surface preparation products," Napier has shown the chemical industry that it's possible to build a business around less-toxic substances.

NOKIA

www.nokia.com

This Finland-based corporation — the world's largest maker of cellphones — has increased its presence in the Seattle area in the past year with the acquisition of two local startup companies, Twango and Loudeye.

Nokia has gone much further than most other electronics manufacturers in eliminating problem materials from its products, including lead, polyvinyl chloride and phthalates.

In the September 2007 edition of Greenpeace's Guide to Greener Electronics, Nokia has the highest score of the 14 rated consumer electronics companies.

Setting a lofty standard for disclosure and transparency, Nokia's Web site contains details about toxics and substance management that very few other corporations provide.

REI

www.rei.com

A local institution since 1938, now headquartered in Kent, the REI (Recreational Equipment, Inc.) cooperative has evolved into a national chain with 90 stores.

As a member of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition (www.sustainablepackaging.org), the company strives to reduce the environmental impacts of its packaging, even eliminating containers and wrapping for some products.

REI also blazes new ground with an environmental logo program introduced in August. This project has already labeled more than 50 REI brand styles of clothing as eco-sensitive, with more products coming.

As part of this effort, the company provides the best short summaries I've seen (www.rei.com/ecosensitive) of the pros and cons of seven different Earth-friendly materials for clothing, including bamboo, hemp, recycled polyester and organic cotton.

Though certainly not the only retailers and manufacturers showing green leadership, these five stand out. Let's hope many more companies aspire to join them.

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