

Columnists

In the news:

- 520 bridge
- Intiman Theatre
- PTSD costs
- Home & Garden show

Originally published January 24, 2012 at 3:41 PM | Page modified January 27, 2012 at 9:54 PM

Homework, skepticism needed with eco-labels

It may take some homework to identify truly "green" products.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

We can't buy green products alone. How are we supposed to know if that TV or jar of pickles is environmentally preferable to other TVs or pickles? We need help.

Environmental logos and symbols on product labels can provide valuable guidance, but the recent proliferation of green logos has generated considerable consumer confusion.

Dozens of green-logo programs vie for our attention, along with unofficial green symbols that have sprouted up like weeds. A single product label today might carry three or four environmental symbols and logos.

Q: Why isn't there one central eco-labeling system, run by the government or an impartial nonprofit group, covering most products?

A: A comprehensive program like that would be extremely expensive and complicated to operate. The most successful eco-labeling programs focus on specific product categories such as appliances or wood products, or primarily serve selected purchasers such as businesses and institutions. Even those targeted programs face significant challenges, especially in getting interested parties to agree on standards for the environmental certifications.

Q: Instead of having a bunch of voluntary labeling programs, wouldn't it be easier for consumers if governments just mandated that products meet certain environmental standards?

A: It might be, and governments do regulate environmental standards in some cases. However, developing and enforcing equitable regulations is also exceedingly difficult. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other government agencies have expanded voluntary labeling programs recently, partly as a response to the business community's opposition to increased regulation.

Q: Which green logos or symbols on product labels are the least useful?

A: Be skeptical of any green symbol not connected with a legitimate certification program. For

example, the familiar recycling symbol showing three chasing arrows now appears on thousands of product labels, but is sometimes misleading. That symbol may just mean the package or product is technically recyclable, which is true for nearly everything. The recycling symbol on a label provides no assurance that local recycling programs accept that material.

A product label may also feature an arty little made-up symbol with words like "Non-Toxic" or "Eco-Safe." Those symbols have no informational value because no agreement exists on definitions for those terms.

Q: How do I know which eco-labels I can trust?

A: The federal government operates several reliable green labeling programs, including:

- Energy Star, primarily for energy-efficient appliances and electronics (energystar.gov).
- WaterSense, for water-saving products such as certain faucets and toilets (epa.gov/watersense).
- Design for the Environment, for safer cleaning products (epa.gov/dfe).
- USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) Organic, for food grown without pesticides or petroleum-based fertilizers (seati.ms/xesyB9).

Well-regarded eco-labels managed by nonprofit organizations include FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) for wood products (fsc.org), Marine Stewardship Council for seafood (msc.org) and Green Seal for household cleaners, paints and more (greenseal.org).

That just scratches the surface. Many other green labeling programs may also prove helpful. If you see an unfamiliar logo, go online to research it. Even the most well-known green labeling programs have detractors and competitors, so you may want to get several opinions before deciding which programs to follow.

Q: This sounds like a lot of work. Are eco-labeling programs really that worthwhile?

A: Here's an example of how green labeling helps consumers: The nonprofit Northwest Energy Efficiency Alliance launched the Energy Forward label for TVs in 2009, identifying the best, most energy-efficient TVs among the large number of Energy Star certified televisions (energyefficiantelectronics.org).

Inspired by that regional effort, Energy Star started its own national "Most Efficient" labeling pilot project in 2011 for TVs and other products (seati.ms/zWinLX). If you buy a superefficient television labeled through either program, you could save more than \$200 in energy costs over the life of the TV.

While far from perfect, green labeling illustrates the growth and maturity of the environmental movement. Next time you shop, give that eco-logo another glance.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com.

On Twitter @ecoconsumer