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Sorting through confusing 'green' product claims

A look at 10 enviro-labels that appear on products, what they claim and who backs them.

By Kate Beem
McClatchy Newspapers

With the Gulf of Mexico oil spill heavy on minds everywhere, 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 nontoxic cleaning products that list all 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.

Here's a look at 10 labels.

Certified Biodegradable

This logo is offered by Scientific Certification Systems, a neutral third-party group that evaluates products'

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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*

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