

Best Practices for Purchasing Environmentally Sustainable Products

After more than 20 years of buying “green” or “environmentally sustainable” products, the federal community has a great story of our successes. We have also learned that it is not true that these products always cost more or do not meet our performance needs. Here are some examples of best practices for purchasing environmentally sustainable products, based on the collective experience of federal agencies.

Getting Started. How do you know whether there are green requirements for the products you are going to purchase? There are three places you can check. First, check your agency’s green purchasing plan or sustainability plan. (Depending on the agency, this plan might also be called an affirmative procurement plan or an environmentally preferable purchasing plan.) Second, the three federal agencies that designate these products – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Department of Energy, and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) – maintain web sites with lists of the designated products and lots of related information. However, that could mean checking more than six web sites. To make it easy to find all the products and requirements in one place, you can check the [Green Procurement Compilation](#).

Ensuring Performance. Environmentally sustainable products are commercially available and meet the performance needs of federal agencies in most instances. If you are not sure if a product will meet your performance needs, try a pilot. The Department of Defense has been pilot testing products, particularly biobased products. You can find the results by clicking on “Department of Defense” in the [Green Procurement Compilation](#).

Another option is a “blind” test. Several federal facilities tested the performance of recycled content copier paper by supplying it in their copier rooms, without announcing the switch from virgin paper. No or few complaints were received. Once it was announced that recycled paper was being used, complaints started, but it had already been established that the recycled paper met performance needs.

Addressing price. It is a common myth that environmentally sustainable products cost more than competing products. In fact, sometimes they cost more, sometimes they cost the same, and sometimes they cost less. As with any product, buying in bulk and using longer-term contracts both help to reduce costs. In addition, environmentally sustainable products can be less expensive on a life cycle cost basis. For example, energy efficient products meeting EPA’s [Energy Star](#) standards or Federal Energy Management Program specifications are in the top 25% of energy efficiency. According to EPA’s [Energy Star](#) program, imaging equipment meeting the latest energy efficiency requirements will use from 40 to 55% less energy than standard models. That will definitely lower a building’s energy use and corresponding utility bills!

Products that can be reused or recycled at the end of their useful life also help an agency to save money on disposal fees. Also look for products that can be remanufactured, and consider entering into a take back arrangement with the manufacturer or vendor, a common practice with

toner cartridges and truck and bus tires. Agencies can receive credit towards their next purchase by returning products for remanufacturing.

Meeting Socio-Economic Goals. Another myth is that buying environmentally sustainable products is inconsistent with buying from small, minority-owned, women-owned, and service disabled veteran-owned businesses or buying from the National Industries for the Blind (NIB). Many of these businesses offer environmentally sustainable products – either as the product manufacturer or as a reseller. NIB agencies produce a wide variety of environmentally sustainable products, such as recycled content office paper products, remanufactured toner cartridges, and biobased cleaning products.

Increasing Availability. Establishing contracts or blanket purchase agreements for environmentally sustainable products ensures that the products will be available. EPA has used agency-wide BPAs against the GSA Multiple Award Schedules, while other agencies have established their own contracts for environmentally sustainable products. When products are part of a large catalog, require the vendor to identify the environmentally sustainable products in its catalog. After several public and private customers requested that environmentally sustainable products be highlighted, office supply companies created “green” catalogs for their customers. This made it easy for customers to find the products and also helped to increase supply nationwide.

If you have a facility supply store, you can increase the availability of environmentally sustainable products by creating a green products section within the store. For example, Homestead Air Reserve Base created an Environmentally Friendly Products Section in its base supply store. The original aisle proved to be so popular that more and more products were added, making it easy to “buy green”.

Looking for Non-Hazardous or Non-Toxic Alternatives. EPA’s Safer Choice Program, as well as many third party standards and labels, promote products that perform well and are safer for human health and the environment. Using safer products has a positive effect on employee health and increases productivity through reduced employee sick days, among other things. The Department of the Interior was a trail-blazer in working with its janitorial contractors to switch to environmentally preferable cleaning products. The contractors noted anecdotally that their employees had less respiratory infections after switching to the environmentally sustainable products. Agencies have anecdotally reported similar results from addressing the adhesives used in carpet installation. Many cleaning products typically used in the workplace environment, such as carpet and upholstery cleaners, have less toxic alternatives.

Using Third Party Standards and Labels. Agencies are encouraged to use non-governmental environmental standards and ecolabels for products where no federal green requirement exists. Agencies can also use non-governmental standards and ecolabels for products that do have a federal green requirement. For many products, the basic federal requirements address a single environmental attribute but not other important environmental attributes. For example, there are recycled content requirements for furniture, but there are no requirements for the sustainability of wood or adhesives. Federal buyers can address toxicity by specifying that products emit low volatile organic compounds (VOCs) or by using a multi-attribute standard such as the

ANSI/BIFMA e3 furniture sustainability standard developed by the Building and Institutional Furniture Manufacturers Association (BIFMA).

In September 2015, EPA issued interim recommendations for agency use of non-governmental standards and ecolabels. The [Green Procurement Compilation](#) now identifies EPA's interim recommendations. For example, for Bathroom and Spa Cleaners, the GPC informs you that the product was designated by USDA in the BioPreferred Program, that there are Safer Choice-labeled alternatives, and that EPA recommends that these products meet specific Green Seal or Underwriters Laboratory standards.