

Buying Green

A Guide to Environmentally Preferential Procurement for Offices within the Thomas Jefferson Planning District

The public sector, from the federal level down to local jurisdictions, has played a key role in purchasing goods and services that minimize adverse effects to the environment. In doing so, they not only lessen their own impact, but they use their purchasing power to help generate a local market for such products. The following “cheat sheet” is intended to assist localities, school boards, and other interested organizations in incorporating Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) principles into their procurement procedures.

Third Party Certifiers

When so many advertisements make unfounded “green” claims, it’s hard for even the most well-intentioned consumer to sort through it all. Fortunately, there are third party certifiers to help. The following two labels are recommended for a few reasons. They use objective criteria in a transparent process to judge the “greenness” of all attributes of a product over its entire lifecycle, from extraction of raw materials to its fate at the end of its usable life. Compliance with these standards is typically enforced by audits and ongoing monitoring, rather than being self-reported. Finally, they are well established, comprehensive sources with numerous product endorsements to offer.



Green Seal is a non-profit certification organization in operation since 1989. They are used widely by government agencies and other major institutions. Their standards for different product classes, as well as a searchable database of qualified providers, is available on their website: www.greenseal.org



EcoLogo is another certifier that originated in a 1988 program of the Government of Canada. It is currently North America’s largest certifier and shares a good reputation with Green Seal. Their process is equally transparent and easy to use. www.greenlogo.com

Other labels exist to certify specific product types or a single attribute of a product:



EPEAT is a lifecycle certification for electronics. Supported by the EPA, EPEAT’s criteria includes toxics reduction, recycled content and recyclability, product longevity, end-of-life management, energy efficiency, packaging and corporate responsibility.



Energy Star is a self-reporting certification for energy-efficiency of products. Standards are set by the EPA and the DOE, but there is no third party certifier for increased transparency.

Forest Stewardship Council certifies forest management practices for wood products.

USDA Organic certifies food production and processing.

USGBC LEED certifies environmental performance in buildings and neighborhoods.

EPA Water Sense certifies water efficiency and usage.

GreenGuard certifies indoor air quality.

Cooperative Purchasing Alliances

Larger-scale buying networks can help localities stay informed about the availability of green and healthy options. They will often use standards from the certification organizations mentioned here to select products for their members. The State of Virginia encourages localities to buy cooperatively.

Responsible Purchasing Network

offers consulting services for “socially responsible and environmentally sustainable purchasing.”

www.responsiblepurchasing.org

Going Green is a program from U.S. Communities Government Purchasing Alliance. The purpose is to help identify green products and use the leveraging power of multiple purchasers to reduce prices.

www.uscommunities.org

Supplementing standards with local knowledge

While labeling can be valuable for verifying green claims, there may be smaller producers or contractors in the region that fall under their radar screen. Local production can add an extra environmental benefit by reducing the supply chain and the energy needed for transport. It may be advantageous to provide flexibility in contract documents or environmentally preferable purchasing policies for supporting businesses that are locally known for their ecologically responsible practices.

Including Standards within a Contract

Once a standard is agreed upon by your procurement office, it may be beneficial to incorporate language within contracts to ensure that any outsourced work is held to the same requirements. Precise wording of the contract will require a more thorough legal reading, but the following lines illustrate a concise and clear message.

Sample language:

“Products purchased under this contract must provide demonstrable proof of meeting the _____ standard. The _____ standard is available at <_____>”

“Products purchased under this contract must provide demonstrable proof of meeting the **EnergyStar** standard. The **EnergyStar** standard is available at <www.energystar.gov>”

The following quotes are taken from other organizations in our area and around the country. They represent some language that may be appropriate for contract documents or a full-fledged EPP policy.

“Products carrying the ENERGY STAR label shall be preferred for purchases when available and permitted by procurement laws and policies.”

– Albemarle County Public Schools, Energy Management and Conservation Policy, April 2009

“Select plants to minimize waste by choosing species for purchase that are appropriate to the microclimate, species that can grow to their natural size in the space allotted them, and perennials rather than annuals for color. Native and drought-tolerant plants that require no or minimal watering once established are preferred.”

– Alameda County, CA, December 2009

“Award shall be made to the lowest responsive and responsible bidder offering recycled paper and paper products of a quality suitable for the purpose intended providing that the bid price is not more than 10 percent greater than the bid price of the lowest responsive and responsible bidder offering non-recycled paper and paper products. Recycled paper and paper products means any paper or paper products meeting the EPA Recommended Content Standards defined in 40 C.F.R. Part 250.”

– Fairfax County, Purchasing Resolution, June 2009

“Public and private development that requires a Development Site Plan (DSP) or Development Special Use Permit (DSUP) should achieve the following green building standard:
Non-Residential: LEED Silver.
Residential: LEED Certified, LEED for Homes, or ANSUICC-700 2008 National Green”

– City of Alexandria, Green Building Policy, April 2009

Writing and EPP Policy

The 2009 Virginia Public Procurement Act, which governs purchasing for all jurisdictions and agencies in the state, leaves room for localities to exercise some preference for green products and services. Some localities have passed specific EPP policies to ensure that these standards are spelled out clearly and fully transparent for the public.