

SmartMoney

Eco-Friendly Product? Ask the Green Watchdogs

By: Jami Makan

April 6, 2010

When soccer fans watch the San Jose Earthquakes play at home in Buck Shaw Stadium, they're probably paying more attention to the team's star midfielder or even its mascot, Quakesaurus, than to global warming. But in fact, the Quakes are doing their bit to help the planet: For one game the team bought renewable energy certificates to offset the electricity used in the stadium that night. And how would fans know? Turns out there's an outfit that tries to verify all this, Green-e, a San Francisco-based nonprofit whose flower logo was emblazoned on the scoreboard.

Say hello to the grand pooh-bahs of green. In what's shaping up to be quite a niche in the global eco-economy, certification groups have sprouted up in record numbers, promising to verify that the wood in your new bookcase was really harvested from a sustainably managed forest ([Forest Stewardship Council](#)), the hotel you've chosen actively works to minimize its garbage (Sustainable Travel International) and the school your child attends uses nontoxic cleansers (Green Flag Program). There's even a program that identifies bleach in your toilet paper.

Green seals such as these are proliferating, of course, to help separate the environmentally virtuous from the poseurs and pretenders looking to snag a piece of

the estimated \$1.04 trillion green economy. Indeed, though the number of new consumer goods making eco-friendly claims jumped 30 percent between 2008 and 2009, a recent study shows that almost 60 percent of green-product claims originate with the manufacturer itself, without supporting information or third-party confirmation. (No wonder Congress held a hearing last year called "It's Too Easy Being Green.") Ecolabelling.org estimates there are now more than 300 environmental watchdogs worldwide, eager to cast an eagle eye on the eco-marketplace.

Certainly, not all of them are created equal, since certifiers' standards and oversight vary enormously. Critics say some simply confer their seals for a fee without doing any monitoring, while others use vaguely defined standards. (The ubiquitous chasing-arrow recycle logo is widely misused, critics say, since it's in the public domain.) And corporate self-monitoring programs can be compromised by business interests—and lack of transparency. Still, many certifiers are working to guide consumers through the confusion of the fast-growing green marketplace. Below, a look at a few widely used certifications.

Energy Star

Going green often means saving greenbacks, and [Energy Star](#), one of the best-known eco-labels, offers consumers just that: the prospect of lower energy bills. The seals, which appear on more than 60 categories of electronics and appliances, are designed to recognize the 25 percent that do best at saving energy. Energy Star also certifies energy-efficient new homes.

But not everyone is wowed by the label. Since its inception in 1992, Energy Star, jointly run by the Environmental Protection Agency and [U.S. Department of Energy](#), has been knocked for relying too much on manufacturers' own testing, for its high percentage of certifications and for a limited focus that allowed its energy-efficient products to also include less eco-friendly elements like mercury. In response, Energy Star Project Manager Kathleen Vokes says, standards have toughened up—manufacturers must now test TVs while they're switched on, for example—and both agencies are ramping up in-house and third-party testing.

EcoLogo

It may not be a household name, but EcoLogo has an impressive reach. Its seals, managed by green-marketing group TerraChoice, cover more than 150 product categories, including cleansers, office supplies and [building products](#). Its database covers hundreds of types of flat paint alone.

EcoLogo Executive Director Scot Case says it devises its standards in a transparent, public process. Plus, the group scrutinizes products for [environmental impact](#) throughout their life cycle, including manufacturing, use and disposal. Its standard for laundry detergents,

for example, not only bans certain chemicals but requires products to be fully biodegradable.

Forest Stewardship Council

Last year Frank McCarthy, who likes playing progressive rock with his friends in St. Petersburg, Fla., bought a Gibson Les Paul Exotic. He liked the guitar's lower price and clean look—but also that it was branded with the label "SmartWood," a reference to an audit program run by the nonprofit Rainforest Alliance. For this model, the alliance verified that the wood came from forests that met standards set by the Forest Stewardship Council.

The council says it has issued more than 15,000 certificates, approving some 5 percent of the world's forests as eco-friendly. Makers of paper, packaging and furniture products often seek "chain of custody" certification that traces wood back to forests harvested in a sustainable way. This helps them avoid scrutiny from environmental groups and even federal prosecution for using illegal wood. But because the council relies on external groups to do its certification legwork, some critics say it can't ensure its seals are upheld. The council says it terminates certificates if a company fails to meet its standards. "We are the true high road in forest certification," says a spokesperson.