

Green Municipal Project

A Project of MASSPIRG and Toxics Action Center

Safe and Green Cleaning Products

Private consumers and producers react to changes in Government purchasing

Government procurement can serve as an instrument to improved environmental policy. In 1989, industry produced and used over 350 billion pounds of chemicals. Some 5.7 billion pounds of those toxic chemicals were released into the air, water, land and sewage systems across the country. While we cannot lose focus on reducing industrial use of toxins, it is important to recognize that municipalities also have a role to play in eliminating unnecessary exposure to hazardous substances.

Purchasing "green products" can have a ripple reducing the amount of hazardous chemicals used and hazardous products manufactured. This can further reduce both dangers to workers and consumers while contributing to the total reduction of toxic harm to the environment and human health.

When municipalities buy products that contain hazardous ingredients they are adding to the damage which results from the use of hazardous chemicals. Damage to human health can include: reproductive and developmental disorders, premature death, cancer, nervous system damage, damage to the kidney or other internal organs, birth defects, and hyperactivity in children.

Alternative Green Purchasing

A number of the products that municipalities purchase for cleaning schools and other government owned buildings contain hazardous chemicals that pose a potential threat to human health. Products that contain toxic chemicals include: bleaches, bathroom cleaner and disinfectants, drain cleaners, paint strippers, adhesives, floor cleaners, window cleaners, and all purpose and ammonia-based cleaners.

The U.S. EPA provides a list of chemicals used in cleaning which indicates hazardous ingredients as well as possible alternatives and hints. Safer alternatives that may be used by municipalities include:

- Instead of all-purpose that are ammonia based, use a vinegar and salt-water mixture or baking soda and water. Use floor cleaners with neutral liquid concentrated detergents. Companies produce these products which contain surfactants that are biodegradable.
- Avoid use of chemical drain cleaners Utilize hand plungers or snakes as a safer alternative. If a chemical product is necessary try bacteria based cleaners rather than chlorine bleach based products.
- Rather than use scouring products that contain silica (as an abrasive) which is dangerous if inhaled, or chlorine based cleaners, use plain baking soda powder that contains no surfactants at all.

Municipalities Should Purchase from Companies that Sell Green Products

Municipalities can stimulate markets for environmentally sound products by purchasing off the state's forthcoming contract for greener cleaning products. This contract is due to be in place by early fall of this year. It will include vendors who will service all regions of the state. The cleaning products themselves will also have been tested in "real world" settings by municipalities and government agencies around the state.

For more information on safer cleaning products or implementing green purchasing at your community contact Paul Bunts, MASSPIRG (617) 292-4800 or Eric Weltman, Toxics Action Center (617) 292-4821.