

Eco-Tip for 8/13/17

Don't Call it "Environmentally Friendly"

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What does it mean when a product is labeled "environmentally friendly"? According to the Federal Trade Commission, use of such a term means the manufacturer, or at least the company hired to promote the product, is violating guidelines designed to avoid confusion.

The FTC's "Green Guides" call terms like "eco-friendly" a "broad, unqualified claim..." designed to "suggest the product has specific and far-reaching environmental benefits" without actually guaranteeing any such benefits.

Besides, just from a grammatical standpoint, can an object really be "friendly" to the environment? People can be friendly. Objects and environments are simply not "friends," even if they are compatible.

People overwhelmed by all the "green noise" of environmental claims may cynically stop paying attention to claims. However, use of some labels is regulated and meaningful. For example, use of the word "organic," whether for textiles or food, is governed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program. Similarly, only the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency can designate energy saving appliances with an "Energy Star" label.

Additionally, some labels are owned by private organizations, so the threat of lawsuit keeps their labels meaningful. For example, the American Grass-fed Association certifies meat from cows grazed on grass, a practice which produces less methane emissions than would be generated if those cows were fed corn on feed lots. The Flower Label Program guarantees minimum standards of environmental conditions for crops the organization's flower traders and producers say normally contain levels of pesticide residue higher than any food is legally allowed. This seems important for a product people stick their noses into and inhale. "Oh, what a lovely smell."

In the cases of the terms "recycled" and "recyclable," it is important for consumers to learn some basic information and make informed choices. The arrows of the recycling symbol do not necessarily mean a product is recyclable in local programs. For example, curbside recycling programs in Ventura County and most other areas do not recycle "Styrofoam," despite the recycling symbol printed on foam cups and packaging. However, if a product is actually labeled with the word "recyclable," it means recycling facilities for the product must be available to 60 percent of consumers or communities, according to the FTC guidelines.

Similarly, the FTC regulates use of the term “recycled,” but consumers should note whether a label further specifies “post-consumer recycled,” which means it was made from material recycled after its useful former life as a product. This contrasts with “post- industrial” recycled content, which means a product was made from factory scrap that is relatively easy to recycle.

Obtaining certifications can be expensive for manufacturers. Buyers favoring products with specific, substantiated environmental claims can make manufacturers’ diligence worthwhile.

More information:

<https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/press-releases/ftc-issues-revised-green-guides/greenguidessummary.pdf>

www.Ecolabelling.org