



YOUR SOURCE FOR GREEN PRODUCTS + TECHNOLOGY

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Keeping Them Honest

Searching for truth behind green-product claims.

By: [Aurora Sharrard](#)

If you're confused about green building products and the claims their manufacturers are making, you're not alone. I feel that way myself sometimes, and it's my job at the Green Building Alliance to navigate the complex world of green product claims—and help others do the same.

While we still have a lot of work to do to establish reliable standards for the multiple attributes that define green products, the good news is that there are a lot of dedicated people working on this problem, and there are a good number of resources already available to help you find your own comfort level with third-party verification of green claims. This article will guide you through the complexities of green product selection, help you understand how products are labeled and certified, and lead you to the most useful navigational resources.



Ultimately, whether you're getting product information from your local supplier, direct from a manufacturer, from Web surfing, or via networking with colleagues, the most critical thing is that you trust your source and understand the criteria behind their recommendations.

It's also important to note that green building is not just about following checklists and picking products; at its heart, sustainable building is the integration of important elements of design, site, energy, water, health, resource management, and other environmental and human considerations. However, the time does come when you have to select and specify materials, products, and components for a green home. At that point, your focus is certainly on products—and whether they will truly contribute to the green performance goals for your project.

The Greenwash Factor

When companies intentionally or unintentionally make false, misleading, or exaggerated claims about the environmental benefits of their products, it's called "greenwashing."

At the most basic level, we all perpetuate greenwash if we try to lump all of a home's sustainable features together by calling it a "green home" without substantiating our claims through some form of documentation and certification such as through a national or local green building program. Product salespeople, distributors, manufacturers, and marketers can fall into the same greenwashing trap if they exaggerate their products' performance claims or don't mention environmental negatives that might diminish the products' green attributes.

[Claim Check](#)

Click here for a guide to certifications and labels referenced by NAHB and LEED, as well as resources for making green-product selections.

Consequently, there are a lot of individual performance, material, or environmental benefit claims made about building products that require scrutiny. The general rule about these seemingly simple descriptions is to be skeptical and curious enough to look behind the claim for some form of verification. Ask yourself the following:

- Is this claim obviously false? For example, “This product is LEED and NAHB certified.” (Neither USGBC’s LEED program or the NAHB certifies products.)
- Is the claim unrelated or irrelevant? For example, “This product stands out from the competition.”
- Is the claim too generic to make sense? For example, “This product uses the latest eco-friendly technology.”
- Does the claim only address one feature of the product when there are other important ones that are ignored? For example, “This product is maintenance free.”
- Can I verify the claim online or with information on the product itself?

Then start your research. If you can’t find the appropriate information to satisfy your questions in a quick Internet search or phone call, it might be time to start seriously doubting the claims being made.

Labels and Certifications

Greenwashed marketing claims have increased to the point where the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is updating its published *Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims* that address “environmental claims included in labeling, advertising, promotional materials, and all other forms of marketing, whether asserted directly or by implication, through words, symbols, emblems, logos, depictions, [and] product brand names.”

The FTC *Guides* currently require “every express and material-implied claim that the general assertion conveys to reasonable consumers about an objective quality, feature, or attribute of a product or service must be substantiated.” Here’s where labels and certifications come in.

In performing your extended research about certain products, you’ll find there are different types of information resources that can aid your search. Directories are plentiful; these “yellow pages” of existing green building products can serve as a starting point to figure out what your options are in a certain product category.

If you want some form of substantiation of product content or performance, then you’ll be looking for labels and certifications. Labels are simple systems, often based on a single performance attribute like energy or recycled content, in which a blanket label is applied to all products. Certifications, on the other hand, are complex assessments that rely on multiple, science-based criteria for determining whether or not a product qualifies.

Though differentiating between labels and certifications can be tricky, I generally classify systems that only consider a single performance attribute as “labels,” while “certifications” assess multiple product attributes. For example, Energy Star, which is the oldest third-party label in the U.S., uses energy as the primary attribute for rating washing machines, but the label is not associated with water use reduction, which would contribute to it being a multiple-attribute rating. Sometimes looking at a single product attribute is helpful, but if you’re looking for a designation that assesses products more holistically, look for a certification—or multiple labels.

Depending on the product category, certifications vary widely in which performance criteria they include. Some certifications focus very deeply on chemical components or indoor air quality (e.g., Greenguard), while others include everything from raw material extraction to end-of-life issues (e.g., Cradle to Cradle); a few even include information about the corporate sustainability commitments of the product manufacturers themselves (e.g., SMaRT).

Given the many considerations certifications include, you still need to ensure that a product will perform its most important function and meet the priorities you’ve set for your specific project and application. Then, you can review the added benefits of the other attributes to further inform your decision-making process. You’ll find it’s much easier to find multiple-attribute certifications for certain types (e.g., carpet, floor coverings, cabinets, furniture, and wood) than for others. Over time, more and more product categories will join this group.

Levels of Independence

In addition to considering what a label or certification includes, you’ll also want to know who is backing up these green product claims. There are three levels of independence when it comes to evaluating labels and certifications.

“First-party” certifications are claims made by the designer, manufacturer, or other party directly associated with the creation and sale of the product in question. These are also called “self certifications.” All green claims are made directly by the party who creates or sells the product.

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“Second-party” certifications are assertions or labels applied by an outside organization or individual that has financial or other interests in the manufacturer pursuing product certification, such as trade associations, investors, or direct consultants.

“Third-party” certifications are the highest level of assurance for verifying independent product claims; they are made by an independent, unbiased third party. Third parties have no connection to manufacturers except the fee paid for the certification process. Green Seal and Greenguard, among many others, fall into this category.

Sometimes knowing where a product certification comes from and everything it considers is still not enough to make a concrete decision. That’s when you should take a look at its compliance with other larger standard creation bodies like the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)—two bodies that certify the certification organizations themselves. Certifications created according to ANSI or ISO standards must meet high levels of quality, consistency, public comment and review, and accessibility in both the creation and maintenance of their certifications.

If you’re looking for multiple-attribute third-party certifications, a good place to start if you’re trying to figure out what product certifications are out there is the NAHB’s Model Green Home Building Guidelines (which served as the basis for the National Green Building Standard) and the USGBC’s LEED rating system. While neither of these green building rating systems certifies products, both reference a host of product labels and certifications. If you use, trust, and/or are a big proponent of either (or both) systems, it might be helpful to at least start exploring the certifications that these and other green building rating systems reference, as they mostly point to third-party labels or certifications that are trusted by many green building industry stakeholders within the green building industry.

If you’re especially diligent about how and why you specify green products, you know that choosing a multiple-attribute third-party certification is not enough, especially since they’re not all equal. So it is worth repeating that you need to trust the source of your information, which means you need to trust the organization that awards the product certification.

If you don’t understand what’s behind the certification’s logo and everything a manufacturer has to do to get it, how can you justify your product choices? I encourage you to take the time to go beyond the certification, visit the certifying body’s Web site and download the relevant standard.

Final Answer

So, which one’s the best? Unfortunately, there is no overarching answer to that question. Trying to select or specify a green product is the same as selecting a non-green product. It’s just that in addition to all the important criteria you are used to evaluating, now you have many environmental and social considerations to include in your decision-making process. Luckily, you can use multiple-attribute third-party labels and certifications to help you navigate the world of green building product claims. For product categories where no certification programs exist yet, you’ll need to rely on your greenwash radar and filter out unrealistic or improper claims.

The green product market may not be as easy to navigate as we’d like, but it’s a lot better than it used to be and getting better. The system of independently verified green product claims has not yet sorted itself out, and it will take some time to mature. One thing you can do now is to let manufacturers and suppliers that are making unfounded claims know that you won’t trust or accept them without independent substantiation. Your reputation and theirs will depend on making verifiable and realistic product claims.

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Compare Certification Programs

Check out the Green Building Alliance’s latest [Green Product Labels and Certification](#) (pdf) chart to compare programs.