

Title: Environmental Purchasing  
From: Isabella County Recycling Center – MRF  
Author: Stephanie Carroll  
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As consumers we have endless options: twenty types of toothpaste, twelve brands of spaghetti sauce, eight colors of iPods. We get our pick from “low fat” and “no fat” and LCD and plasma. Color, price, taste, and durability all can play into our ultimate purchase decision. Increasingly we have greater opportunity to buy greener, more sustainable, and environmentally friendly products. As the newest (and hopefully long lasting) trend environmental purchasing is fast becoming an important factor in consumer decision.

In order to make good consumer choices, we need to be well informed. The labeling of a product can help us decide which item to purchase, just like reading nutrition labels or listing of megabyte storage. However, labeling is only as good as the truth behind the claim. The Federal Trade Commission monitors products and labeling to ensure fair representation in order to protect consumers. It is helpful to be familiar with and recognize universal labeling and certifications, as well as independent labeling. In order to spend your “green” dollars where they have the most impact make sure to check out labeling definition and validation through consumer protection organizations. The Federal Trade Commission ([www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov)) and Consumer Reports ([www.greenerchoices.org](http://www.greenerchoices.org)) are two examples of resources available to consumers to learn more about eco-labeling.

The following are two label definitions from the Federal Trade Commission. **Compostable:** typically found on items such as disposable plates and cutlery. Compostable simply means that the item will break down into usable compost. The FTC states that it must be compostable in a home composting unit, unless otherwise noted. Be cautious if the label claims that it is compostable in a commercial composting operation, this means that it will not break down in your typical backyard composting unit. Compostable products are a great alternative to other products such as non-biodegradable plastics. **Recyclable:** found on many items including food containers and cardboard boxes. Recyclable products are those that can be “collected, separated or otherwise recovered from the solid waste stream for reuse, or in the manufacture or assembly of another package or product.” It is up to the consumer to be familiar with their local recycling program and the items that are and are not accepted. Much of the confusion surrounding the recyclability of products is with plastics. Each plastic is labeled with a SPI (Society of Plastics Industry) code. This code is represented by a number one through seven surrounded by three chasing arrows. This code does not represent the recyclability of the product, but rather what type of plastic. Products that can be readily recycled in your area are a better choice over the non-recyclable equivalent. Buying the product packaged in cardboard (recyclable) rather than the one packaged in a plastic shell for example, helps you as the consumer decrease the amount of waste you are sending to a landfill.

It is important to be familiar with product labeling and claims so that your good intentions support good environmental practices. Buying products labeled “green,” at this point, does not guarantee to the consumer that the company is practicing environmental stewardship. This is known as “greenwashing.” Companies unfairly play the environmental card to convince you, the purchaser, to buy their product or service.

The positive is that there are many companies out there that firmly believe in producing and providing products and services that conserve and protect natural resources. This is a win-win for producers and consumers. Producers benefit from the sustainability that environmental practices provide and we benefit from promoting and living a low impact life.

Wondering if an item is recyclable or how to properly dispose of an item? Call the recycling hotline 989.773.9631 for recycling and special disposal options.

*[Stephanie Carroll is the Project Manager at the Isabella County Recycling Center – MRF and can be contacted at [scarroll@isabellacounty.org](mailto:scarroll@isabellacounty.org)]*