

Published on *GreenBiz.com* (<http://greenerdesign.com>)

Source URL: <http://greenerdesign.com/news/2009/12/09/working-group-takes-next-steps-toward-safer-chemicals>

Working Group Takes Next Steps Toward Safer Chemicals

By *Jonathan Bardelline*
Created 2009-12-08 23:59

Oakland, CA — Now starting its fourth year, the [Business-NGO Working Group for Safer Chemicals and Sustainable Materials](#) is holding its annual meeting this month, looking back to what it has accomplished and laying the groundwork for its projects to come.

The group had its first meeting in 2006, and after a year of work it [released](#) its "[Guiding Principles for Chemicals Policy](#)" in late 2008. Now with more than 50 organizations endorsing the principles, the working group is developing guidelines for how to implement the principles, which include broad, far-reaching statements like "know and disclose product chemistry" and "assess and avoid hazards," goals which can seem overwhelming to companies that handle hundreds of thousands of products.

The working group has spent the past year developing the guidelines, which are now in a rough draft, laying out how to set benchmarks on each principle and explaining what it means to make progress on each principle.

In addition, a few months back the group released its BioSpecs for biobased food service ware. The [BioSpecs](#) cover environmentally preferable purchasing specifications for food service items that are compostable and made from corn, potatoes, sugarcane and trees.

"There is a shift that is starting and its going to grow," Mark Rossi, research director for [Clean Production Action](#), a working group participant, said at a meeting with members of the press today at Kaiser Permanente's offices in Oakland. Companies need to be cautious of what feedstock is used, what additives are used and what happens to the items at the end of their lives. "Just because it is biobased doesn't mean it's green," he said.

Also this year, the working group launched its public policy efforts and is starting off with advancing safer chemicals and reform of the U.S. [Toxic Substances Control Act](#) (TSCA), the current federal law for regulating chemicals. The working group is strategizing how to support the bill, and Rossi said that part of the group's approach will be to represent the needs of downstream users as opposed to just those needs of chemical manufacturers.

[Kaiser Permanente](#) and [Catholic HealthCare West](#) are two of those downstream users that are particularly concerned with toxics in products that cause health problems since they are both in the business of keeping people healthy.

Both have struggled with working with suppliers to find items with replacements for materials like mercury and PVC/DHP. Kathy Gerwig of Kaiser Permanente said the organization is nearly free of mercury and has made headway in using less PVC. "But we have many, many miles to go," she said.

Rachelle Wenger of Catholic HealthCare West said her organization has run into its share of roadblocks as well. For years it has tried to switch to IV bags made without PVC/DHP, and finally a supplier decided to make them. "We were able to create a market for them," with a multi-year, multi-million dollar contract, she said. Although the bags cost more than previous ones, the change was made both to help create a market as well as to follow the moral imperative to use safer products.

Gerwig said that Kaiser Permanente takes into the total cost of ownership of products, such as with blood pressure devices, when looking at alternative ingredients. While a mercury-free blood pressure device might cost more, it would also require less training, less hazardous waste disposal and avoid any downtime that would be caused if a device broke and a room had to be shut down for some time.

Kaiser Permanente has also improved its supplier disclosure system, asking suppliers who send proposals to give details on what chemicals products contain and provide a list of products that contain alternative chemicals. "It puts a huge burden on us to try to figure out what is safe. We spend a lot of resources on supplier disclosure. We have to have people that look through that and make decisions," she said. Regulatory changes would eliminate the need for a lot of that work.

IV bag - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/makelessnoise/> / [CC BY 2.0](#)