

Business NGO Working Group: Building the Market for Safer Products

By [Deborah Fleischer](#) | December 10th, 2009 [View comments](#)[Comments](#)

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I have been a big proponent of cross-sector dialogue for years and believe that when businesses, NGOs and governmental agencies can work together, more innovative and creative solutions can emerge. My pet peeve with such dialogues is that they often are all talk and no action.

Tuesday, at meeting at Kaiser Permanente's Oakland office, I and a two other members of the press had the opportunity to sit down and chat with a few members of the [Business NGO Working Group](#), a project of [Clean Production Action](#), whose mission is to "design and deliver strategic solutions for green chemicals, sustainable materials and environmentally preferable products." Its lively International Director Beverly Thorpe stressed that the Working Group members really do roll up their sleeves and work through the tough issues. And with a current focus on implementation and policy reform, they are a group worth paying attention to.

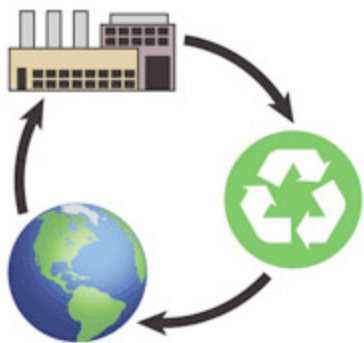
Business representatives from [Kaiser Permanente](#), [Catholic HealthCare West](#), [Seventh Generation](#) and [Staples](#) attended the meeting, to update us on the group's current projects and future direction.

The Working Group is a unique collaboration of business and NGO leaders who "are creating a roadmap to the widespread use of safer chemicals in consumer products." They were here in the Bay Area this week for their annual meeting. Starting in 2006, with twenty-two organizations from the environmental community and the electronics, health care, furnishing and retail sectors, today the group has grown to 170 [participants](#), working on three key initiatives: Safer Chemicals, sustainable materials and public policy reform.

Moving into Action on Safer Chemicals: The group released [Guiding Principles for Chemicals Policy](#), which include four broad guiding principles:

1. Know and disclose product chemistry,
2. Assess and avoid hazards,
3. Commit to continuous improvement and
4. Support public policies and industry standards.

Sixteen businesses, including [HP](#), [Method](#), [Seventh Generation](#), [Staples](#) and [Whole Foods](#) have endorsed the principles. Some companies are hesitant to endorse them until they better understand what is expected of companies in regards to implementation. The Working Group is currently finalizing guidelines that will help businesses understand how to set benchmarks and measure progress on implementing the principles.



Developing Bio-based Plastic Specifications: Not all biobased food service ware is the same, and the Working Group has developed [specifications](#) to guide purchasers. “Just because it is biobased doesn’t mean it’s green,” said Mark Rossi, research director for [Clean Production Action](#).

Their goal is to “develop consistent and robust criteria that allow product manufacturers to identify and select materials that are sustainable during their creation (growing the feedstock), production, use and end of life cycles.”

Reforming Public Policy: The Working Group is also engaging downstream chemical users in chemical policy reform, with a focus on advancing safer chemicals and reform of the federal [Toxic Substances Control Act](#) (TSCA), the existing federal law that regulates chemicals. One of the group’s strategies is to represent the voice of downstream users, whose needs are different than the chemical manufacturers. For example, downstream users such as Kaiser Permanente, Catholic HealthCare West (CHW) and Staples spend significant time and resources in supplier disclosure, in an attempt to better understand what is in their products. They are also working to strengthen [California’s Green Chemistry Initiative](#).

The Biggest Challenges

When I asked Roger McFadden, Chief Science Officer and VP of Science and Technology at Staples what the biggest demand is from their customers, he replied, “They want to know what is

in the products and what the risks are.” He explained that when he tried to find out what was in his products, he found the data “biased, fragmented and ambiguous.”

McFadden commented that the Working Group “gives us the tools to make more informed substitution choices and is a safe haven where we can have a dialogue and begin to implement these things in our supply chain.”

Kathy Gerwig of Kaiser Permanente agreed that the Working Group has been really valuable. Lacking an internal chemical policy, Kaiser Permanent ended up using the Working Group’s principles as the basis for its internal policy. She also stressed that one of the key challenges is simply finding out what is in products.

When I asked if some of the safer alternatives cost more, she explained that for many items, overall cost of ownership is either lower or cost neutral. And in cases where it does cost more, they see purchasing the greener alternative both a moral imperative and as an important long-term strategy to support building the market for greener products. For example, while a mercury-free device might cost more, it requires less training, less hazardous waste disposal and avoids downtime from clean-up.

One of the other challenges is actually finding a supplier who sells the greener alternatives.

Rachelle Wenger of CHW explained that for years it has tried to switch to PVC/DEHP-free IV bags, but there was no supplier making them. The company worked with suppliers to get the greener, safer bags and helped create a market by committing to a multi-year, multi-million dollar contract with [B.Braun](#).

One great benefit of organizing larger purchasers is that they can help create the markets for the greener, safer products.

Interested in Learning More or Joining?

Speaking of building the market for greener alternatives, it will take even more downstream users, and a wider range of businesses, to create real change. Consider getting involved. The benefits includes a safe forum for exchanging information, tools to screen products and information on such issues as packaging, LCA and toxicity.

For more information, contact Mark Rossi, Chair of the Business-NGO Working Group, mark@cleanproduction.org.

For another perspective on the meeting, see [GreenerDesign’s](#) summary of it.

Deborah Fleischer is president of [Green Impact](#), a strategic environmental consulting practice that helps companies engage employees, strengthen their relationships with stakeholders, develop profitable green initiatives and communicate their successes and challenges. She brings deep expertise in sustainability strategy, stakeholder engagement, program development and written communications. You can follow her occasional tweet [@GreenImpact](#)