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Innovation at the intersection of health and the environment

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### **Better Profits Through Green Chemistry**

When employees at Construction Specialties Muncy, Penn. offices learned that a toxic waste incinerator was to be installed in nearby Allenwood they got to work fighting against it. A few staffers even joined with a local grassroots group that eventually succeeded in blocking the incinerator's permits. "At first we had this collective sigh of relief, but then we realized that the incinerator would just be built in some other town, and that got us thinking about the source of the problem—toxic waste—and what we could do about it," says Construction Specialties' vice president and general manager Howard Williams.

Construction Specialties is a supplier of building materials to some of the largest industrial and commercial enterprises in the country, and when the company began looking into phasing toxics out of its products it started with polyvinyl chloride (PVC), a common ingredient of many building materials and known to release harmful dioxin and chlorine compounds. While the Allenwood incident inspired the staff to think about toxics, Williams says the adoption of a "healthy chemicals" strategy was not completely altruistic. Customers were calling for safer products as well.

The marketplace is moving toward green chemistry and we have customers—Kaiser Permanente, for example, the largest healthcare provider and insurer in U.S.—that have certain requirements for the materials they purchase," Williams says. "We have a contract with Kaiser that's worth a substantial amount of money annually and if we did not have the sort of chemical policy we have in place we would not have gotten that contract."

Construction Specialties is not alone in either its journey toward green chemistry or its discovery that demand for safer chemicals is on the rise.

There are rising B2B demands for green chemicals," says Rich Liroff, executive director of the Investor Environmental Health. Network. "Nike is now highlighting preferred green chemicals in its purchasing requirements. Staples also has developed a list of "bad actor chemicals;" and quite recently, several Group Purchasing Organizations in the health care sector, with buying power estimated at roughly \$20 billion, developed a questionnaire for suppliers that focused on various sustainability questions, including the presence or absence of specific chemicals of concern.

Several large chemical companies are also throwing their support behind reform of the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) in the United States, legislation that hasn't been revised since it was enacted in 1976. Faced with larger demand for green chemicals, companies that got an early start in the field, like DOW and BASF, wouldn't mind tighter chemical regulations to make the business case for green chemistry that much stronger.

Companies like Staples and Construction Specialties that have already put a considerable amount of time and money into sourcing safer chemicals are also working together to share what they've learned with other companies looking to green their chemical supply chains. The BizNGO Group includes both Staples and Construction Specialties, along with companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Dell, Method and a dozen other top-tier manufacturers, along with several non-governmental organizations, including the Center for Environmental Health and the Natural Resources Defense Council. In late November 2011, the group released two important new tools, the Principles for Sustainable Plastics and the Chemical Alternatives Assessment Protocol. "These are extremely important—the pressure on companies to green their chemical supply chain will only grow and companies will need tools with which to respond," Liroff says.

There are still, of course, industry hold-outs that don't want to see TSCA reform and don't believe the demand for green chemistry exists—at least not to the extent that it would be worth changing the status quo. Industry trade groups, although in favor of TSCA reform on the surface, have tended to push for minimal changes, insisting that the chemicals currently in use are safe enough already. For Williams, this sort of thinking is just bad business.

For a period of time—in 2004 and 2005, when we were first beginning to rethink our chemical policy—we were trying to decide whether to listen to our customers or to what industry groups were saying. It doesn't take a very large brain to figure out that industry groups don't buy products, but customers do.

Williams and his company are particularly interesting in the context of the often-politicized chemical debate because neither is stereotypically "green."

"I'm a conservative Republican and in environmental circles it's almost like who let you in the door?" Williams says. "But safe chemistry is not a political issue, it's a people issue. And when I talk about this stuff with my equally conservative friends they say, you're right, we need to do better. We've all been touched by cancer, or infertility issues, or asthma—all of these issues seem to be on the rise, and I don't think it's because we're devolving, I think it's because something has happened. Even if the science out there about these chemicals is 50 percent wrong or even 75 percent wrong, which I don't think it is, it still makes sense be on the safe side."