

CHEMICALS: Coalition launches campaign to promote safer, sustainable materials  
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Sara Goodman, Greenwire reporter

A coalition of environmental groups and business organizations is launching an effort today to promote the development and use of safer chemicals and more sustainable materials. The Business-NGO Working Group for Safer Chemicals and Sustainable Materials first began two years ago in an attempt to set guidelines on safer chemicals for businesses, said Mark Rossi, research director for Clean Production Action, which spearheaded the project. "A lot of times, there's a sense that business and environmental organizations don't work together because they're at opposite poles," Rossi said. "This shows they can work together on a visionary agenda, which really is trying to transform the way chemicals are produced and used in the economy."

The group's new "Guiding Principles for Chemicals Policy" lays out four steps for businesses to ensure the use of safer chemicals. They are:

- 1) Know and disclose product chemistry. Manufacturers should identify substances used in a product across its lifecycle, while buyers should request product chemistry data.
- 2) Assess and avoid hazards. Manufacturers should use the least hazardous chemicals and set priorities for eliminating chemicals of high concern.
- 3) Commit to continuous improvement. Businesses should create a framework for regular reviews of product and process chemistry and promote the use of chemicals, processes and products with inherently lower hazard potential.
- 4) Support public policies and industry standards that further the first three steps.

As the group hammered out the principles, the biggest sticking point was disclosure, Rossi said. Environmental groups support full disclosure, while manufacturers are worried about proprietary information. Part of the challenge is the complexity of the supply chain and the need to get information from every level. "We have different degrees of involvement in bringing safe products to market, and it takes collaboration from all sides," said Kathy Gerwig, vice president of workplace safety at Kaiser Permanente, a health care organization and group member. "It's one thing for me as a buyer to say, 'I'm going to ask manufacturers for their chemical makeup,' and it's another for a supplier to say, 'I will turn over the chemical makeup.'" "But growing consumer demand for green products is helping make a case for businesses shifting toward more sustainable products, Gerwig said." There's been a growing interest in green living and sustainability in general among consumers, and industrial purchasers and manufactures

are trying to seize a marketplace they see changing," she said. "It can be a huge competitive advantage." While the movement is gaining popularity, most chemists lack basic training in environmental hazards and seeking safer solutions, and many businesses have difficulty grappling with altering familiar chemicals and manufacturing techniques (Greenwire, Sept. 15). Recognizing these challenges, Rossi said the next step is to figure out how companies can begin to implement the guidelines. "The first step is the awareness," he said. "This is a principle, what we're striving for. The next step going forward is, 'What does this mean in implementation, including what's ideal and what's possible?'"

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