EPA Listening Session on Sustainable Products
September 24, 2010 -- 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM
U.S. EPA, Potomac Yard, Conference Center
2777 Crystal Drive, Arlington, VA 22202

Meeting Objective:

To solicit input from stakeholders to help EPA better define its role in the green or sustainable products movement.

Agenda:

Welcome and introductions – Jim Jones, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention

Plenary Session – Facilitated by Bob Kwartin, ICF Consulting

What do you see as the major policy and research challenges, opportunities and trends impacting the development, manufacture, designation, and use of more sustainable products?

Summary of key points from plenary and introduce structure of break-out sessions

Breakout Session I – Under what circumstances and to what degree might EPA have a role(s) in addressing challenges and opportunities:

1. Establishing the scientific foundation for eco-labels and standards?
2. Assembling information and databases?
3. Identifying sustainability "hotspots" and setting product sustainability priorities?
4. Evaluating the multiple impacts of products across their entire life cycle?
5. Defining criteria for more sustainable products?

Breakout Session II – Under what circumstances and to what degree might EPA have a role(s) in addressing challenges and opportunities:

6. Generating an eco-label(s)?
7. Verifying that products meet standards?
8. Stimulating the market?
9. Developing end-of-life management systems (reuse, recycling, etc.)?
10. Measuring results, evaluating programs?

Attendee List

Summary of Welcome and Introductions

The U.S. EPA held a listening session on sustainable products on September 24, 2010 at the U.S. EPA Potomac Yard conference center in Arlington, Virginia. The primary meeting objective was to solicit input from stakeholders to help EPA better define its role in the green or sustainable products movement.

Jim Jones, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, provided the welcome and introductions for the listening session. Jones provided the meeting context, identified the major questions being asked, provided a glimpse of the current role the EPA is playing, and encouraged open discussion amongst stakeholders. The green market is blossoming and the EPA wants to be more involved; however, decisions need to be made with regards to what role the EPA will actually play. Currently, the EPA occupies some space in the green market, for example, with the WaterSense program and by providing technical support for standard setting organizations. The current role of the EPA is limited and with an expanding marketplace the potential for reinventing this role is huge. The EPA thinks that the environmental protection potential for green products is extraordinary; however, it needs to be done properly. Some of the questions that Jones charged the participants include:

- The green market is blossoming and EPA wants to be a part of this. How can the EPA do this and where does it fit into the arena?
- Should EPA's role in the green market be as narrow as it is today? Or should it be far more comprehensive?

Jones emphasized the importance of working with colleagues to move forward on the green market issue. Once Jones concluded his session, Bob Kwartin, Facilitator, ICF Consulting, opened the plenary session.

Plenary Session

Meeting participants in the plenary were charged with the question: What do you see as the major policy and research challenges, opportunities, and trends impacting the development, manufacture, designation, and use of more sustainable products? Responses to this question varied and many different ideas were brought forward. The major areas of focus for discussion were marketplace considerations, standards and definitions, green-washing, data availability, and research.

SUMMARY OF PLENARY SESSION COMMENTS

These comments were presented to EPA in the plenary session and do not represent EPA views or policy.

Marketplace Considerations

The role of the EPA in the marketplace was debated and various viewpoints were provided by participants. There were several individuals who stated the importance of EPA not-disturbing the marketplace. The justification for this was that disturbance in the marketplace can hinder innovation, reduce competition, lead to a lack of transparency, and impede decision making. Also, it was cautioned that disruption to the marketplace does lead to unanticipated consequences and a one-size-fits-all approach cannot be applied. On the other hand there were individuals who felt that EPA does have a role in the marketplace. The roles that were suggested include driving the market towards sustainable products, encouraging innovative products, and incentivizing the purchase of these products. Justifications for EPA interfering in the marketplace were to encourage better practices, the development of new products, the reduction of non-sustainable product availability, considerations for future generations, and because EPA has the power and regulatory capacity to influence the marketplace. The EPA needs to consider whether or not it should have a role in the marketplace and what its role should be.

The importance of the international marketplace was brought up several times. It was recommended that the United States determine what role it wants to play in the international arena regarding green product development and exports. It was also suggested that as the EPA determines its role, consideration be given to cross-sector harmonization and cross-country coordination of policies. The United States trails other nations in innovations in sustainability. U.S. policy should consider lessons learned from other nations to improve our competitiveness in the area of sustainable products. Utilization of the ISO is one tool the EPA has when considering green products and the international marketplace; it was recommended that U.S. policy be consistent with the ISO given that good work has been done in this area internationally. The EPA can also collaborate with the Commerce Department to determine methods for increasing exports of green and sustainable products.

Standards and Definitions

The development of clear definitions and establishment of standards was one of the charges given to the EPA by meeting participants. The definitions sought include sustainable and green. The process of developing clear definitions for these terms is difficult because it is necessary to develop definitions that go across the spectrum of products. Without clear definitions it is difficult to develop standards. There are current standards of varying quality that need improvement. EPA can be instrumental in developing consistent standards that follow clear definitions. Research into what standards exist today and which ones can be utilized in the future would be beneficial for the EPA in determining its role. Holistic lifecycle

assessments were suggested as one method to establish clear standards. Once standards and definitions are set, consumer confusion regarding green and sustainable products is likely to go down.

There was considerable support for the use of standards. However, it was expressed that reliance on standards could be dangerous in the future. Green should not be an endpoint and we need to use the term greener. Standards are a freezing point and could freeze the marketplace which would reduce innovation and the creation of better practices in the future. Also, it was mentioned that once the government attaches itself to a rating system or label based on standards, consumers rely upon it. Rather than endorsing certain standards, it was suggested that the EPA provide information on the different criteria and standards associated with labels to increase consumer understanding of available products, and that the EPA consider developing principle-based guidelines on how to assess the sustainability of a product. This allows for consumers to make choices based on more personal priorities. It was also suggested that EPA decide what actions to encourage through its regulations – whether the Agency wants to eliminate or reduce worst practices, or whether the Agency wants to encourage best practices.

Greenwashing

Greenwashing is one of the major challenges that the EPA faces as it considers sustainable products. One of the causes of greenwashing is the lack of clear standards based on definitions for green and sustainable. This allows the overselling of products under false pretenses as green. Response to this problem has been slow. EPA can use its regulatory capacity to eliminate greenwashing and establish a competitive playing field for truly sustainable products. This calls for the need for transparency. Use of science data and its availability was mentioned as one avenue to reduce the impact of greenwashing.

There is significant consumer confusion and distrust of products claiming to be green, which is largely in response to greenwashing. Many consumers are trying to buy greener products; however, it is a challenge to determine which products are actually green. Currently, there is not a consistent message about what is green between different agencies like the EPA and United States Department of Agriculture. EPA needs to develop a consistent message which will help empower consumers to make good decisions based on science and standards. In the development of this message, it is imperative that the EPA considers its audience. Language needs to be accessible and education levels needs to be considered when developing communication strategies. This may be through the use of flyers, public service announcements, advertisements etc. Adequate information dissemination would aid in eliminating greenwashing and increasing consumer motivation to purchase sustainable products. In addition, driving the demand side would encourage business to change.

Data Availability

The availability of data in a variety of different capacities was discussed in the plenary session. Data is instrumental in the development of standards, identification of best practices, education of consumers etc. EPA currently collects a lot of data and this can feed standard development to reduce green washing. However, these data need to be packaged in a useable way. One method for doing so would be the creation of a robust database that can be used to develop national priorities in the green marketplace. An example of a suggested database was of health and environmental impacts of current products on the market. The establishment of a list-serve among various partners to facilitate the sharing of information was also discussed. This would improve data accessibility amongst various partners. It was cautioned that the data are complex and have inherent uncertainties that need to be considered during use.

Research

Research into green products and sustainability is instrumental in the future of the green product marketplace. Science is critical in developing innovative green products and sustainable policies. It is important that EPA understand current science revolving around the green marketplace so it can better understand the role that it should play. In addition, EPA can support various partners and put money into grant programs to encourage research and development. The EPA can also play a role in helping partners to understand the science behind current sustainability and green product research. EPA has the tools and resources to bridge qualitative and quantitative measures to come up with priorities. There is a need for more trained professionals in the sustainability field, and the government should support academic institutions through grants and other mechanisms.

SUMMARY OF BREAKOUT DISCUSSIONS

1) Scientific foundation for eco-labels:

Common themes

- Eco-labels should have a strong scientific foundation and EPA should support research in this area, e.g. life cycle assessment and risk assessment methodologies.
- EPA should establish basic definitions, principles and criteria to guide the development of eco-labels.
- Input from a broad spectrum of stakeholders is important and EPA can play a role as convener/facilitator for addressing science issues.
- Learn from existing programs such as DfE and EPEAT.

Other comments

- Understanding supply chain impacts is important.

2) Database development:

Common themes

- EPA should serve as a clearinghouse for scientific data and ecolabel information.
- EPA should consider a role in maintenance of the national LCI database, currently maintained by DOE-NREL.
- Transparency and access to information for a variety of audiences is important.
- EPA has a role in meeting the information needs of small and medium-size businesses and the public.
- Protection of confidential information is important.
- Ingredient disclosure is important.

3) Hotspots in product sustainability:

Common themes

- Hotspot analysis should have a strong scientific basis.
- All stakeholders should be involved.
- Need category rules or some other mechanism to determine which impacts/indicators are most important for a given product category.
- Decisions should be based on return on investment, i.e. greatest environmental benefit for least cost.

Other comments

- Quantity of product (total market for product) is an important factor in setting priorities.

- Use market research to assess impacts and incentives.
- Use LCA and other technical tools.
- Should analysis be based on minimum standards or higher mandatory standards?

4) Evaluating multiple impacts of products across the life cycle:

Common themes

- EPA should provide guidance on LCA because of the differing methods and datasets currently in use.
- Multi-stakeholder involvement is important.
- International coordination on principles is important.

Other comments

- The Green Screen is a good tool.
- A macro-level perspective is important.

5) Define criteria for more sustainable products:

Common themes

- EPA should play a role in establishing basic principles.
- The largest impacts should drive the criteria.
- Multi-stakeholder involvement is important.
- Compatibility with international programs and standards, e.g. ISO life cycle standards, is important.
- Consumer education on key issues, e.g. carbon footprint of products, impacts during product use, is important.

Other comments

- Broader sectors, e.g. energy, transportation, are important as well as products.

6) Generating eco-labels:

Common themes

- There was a clear difference of opinion regarding EPA's role in eco-labeling, with some participants feeling that EPA should only be involved in developing guiding principles, while others felt that EPA should be actively involved in the development of labels and underlying standards, including "owning" the label in certain circumstances.

- The scientific basis and standards behind the label are crucial to its credibility.
- EPA should strengthen successful labels, such as DfE.

Other comments

- Information disclosure is important.
- Coordination with international programs and policies is important, e.g. EU Integrated Product Policy, ISO life cycle standards.
- Is important to distinguish between eco-labels and regulatory requirements.
- The nutrition label on food products has not been an effective approach for reaching consumers.

7) Verifying that products meet standards:

Common themes

- Rely on the existing infrastructure for verification, e.g. existing certification bodies and established procedures.
- Cost and time considerations are important.
- EPA should provide technical support to verification activities.

Other comments

- EPA should not have a role in verification.

8) Stimulating the market:

Common themes

- EPA should help to educate consumers.
- EPA should provide chemical information to small and medium-size businesses.
- Federal agencies and other institutional purchasers can serve as drivers.
- Tiered standards can be an effective incentive.
- There was some concern that an EPA role in stimulating the market could result in negative impacts for some businesses.

Other comments

- Training for designers is important.

9) Developing end-of-life management systems:

Common themes

- EPA should provide guidance to state and local government on recycling and waste management practices.
- End-of-life approaches should have a scientific basis.
- A more holistic view is needed: end-of-life should be considered within the context of the entire product life cycle.

Other comments

- Focus on reducing virgin materials production because impacts of virgin material production are usually greater than disposal impacts.
- Manufacturer take-back programs can be inefficient.

10) Measuring results:

Common themes

- Learn from existing programs, e.g. Energy Star.
- EPA should develop measurement tools.
- Educate consumers on impact measures.
- Data disclosure is important.

Other comments

- EPA can provide valuable macro-level measures, such as national figures for solid waste and greenhouse gas emissions.
- EPA should not measure private sector performance.

OVERARCHING COMMENTS

- EPA should play a lead role in supporting the scientific foundation of sustainable product efforts.
- EPA should serve as a focal point for technical information on sustainable products.
- There is a need for basic definitions and guiding principles for sustainable products, and EPA should be involved in their development.
- Broad stakeholder involvement, including international considerations, is important in all aspects of sustainable products work.

ATTENDEE LIST
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Peter Adler
The Keystone Center
padler@keystone.org
970-513-5841

Dana Arnold
GSA
dana.arnold@gsa.gov

Stephen Ashkin
The Ashkin Group LLC - The Green Cleaning Experts
SteveAshkin@AshkinGroup.com
812-332-7950

Ann Bailey
EPA
bailey.ann@epa.gov

Reinaldo Balbino-Figueriedo
American National Standards Institute
rfigueir@ansi.org
202-3313611

Brenda Baney
Delphi
brenda.b.baney@delphi.com
540-206-2379

Chuck Bell
Consumers Union
bellch@consumer.org

Kenneth Bland
American Wood Council
kbland@awc.org
202-463-2765

Cynthia Bowie
EPA
bowie.cynthia@epa.gov
202-564-7726

Parker Brugge
Best Buy Co., Inc.
parker.brugge@bestbuy.com
202-654-6752

Corey Buffo
DOE
corey.buffo@hq.doe.gov

Jeffrey Burke
National Pollution Prevention Roundtable
jeff@p2.org
202-299-9701

Dennis Bushta
EPA
bushta.dennis@epa.gov
202-564-8400

Scot Case
UL-Environment
scase@terrachoice.com
800-478-0399 ext.245

Stephanie Castorina
IPC - Association Connecting Electronics Industries
StephanieCastorina@ipc.org
703-522-0225

Wendy Cleland-Hamnett
EPA
cleland-hamnett@wendy@epa.gov

Sharon Cooperstein
Green Seal
scooperstein@greenseal.org
202-872-6400 ext.117

Christopher Coyle
Intertek/Atis
chris.coyle@intertek.com
256-963-8371

Barbara Cunningham
EPA
cunningham-hq.barbara@epa.gov
202-564-8198

Christopher Currens
CEQ
christopher_j._currens@ceq.eop.gov

Jim Darr
EPA
Darr.James@epamail.epa.gov

Michael Davis
FTC - Div of Enforcement
mdavis@ftc.gov

Connie Deford
The Dow Chemical Company
cldeford@dow.com

Pete Demarco
International Association of Plumbers and Mechanical Officials (IAPMO)
pete.demarco@iapmo.org

Kevin Dooley
Arizona State University
kdooley@exchange.asu.edu
480-236-9588

David Dunlap
Koch Companies Public Sector, LLC
David.Dunlap@kochps.com
202-879-8511

Mahmoud Elkenaney
Huawei Technologies, USA
melkenaney@huawei.com
214-545-3700

Holly Elwood
EPA
elwood.holly@epa.gov

Holly Evans
TechAmerica
holly.evans@techamerica.org
703-409-1007

Laurie-Ann Flanagan
D.C. Legislative and Regulatory Services, Inc.
lflanagan@dclrs.com
202-872-8440

Leslye Fraser
EPA
fraser.leslye@epa.gov
202-564-5375

Sergio Galeano
Georgia-Pacific, LLC
sergio.galeano@gapac.com

Nancy Geisler
Unisource Worldwide, Inc.
Nancy.Geisler@unisourcelink.com
770-209-6547

Gordon Gillerman
NIST
gordon.gillerman@nist.gov
301-975-8406

Jeffrey Goodman
USDA
jeffrey.goodman@dm.usda.gov

Margaret Guerriero
EPA
guerriero.margaret@epa.gov

Alison Gutterman
Jelmar
ajgutterman@jelmar.com
800-323-5497 ext.636

Deborah Hamilton
Keystone Center

Bill Hanson
EPA
hanson.bill@epa.gov

Alan Hecht
EPA
hecht.alan@epa.gov
202-564-4772

Judith Hochhauser-Schneider
DuPont
judith-hochhauser.schneider@usa.dupont.com
202-728-3670

Doug Johnson
Consumer Electronics Association
djohnson@CE.org
703-907-7686

Jim Jones
EPA

Claire Kammer
Underwriters Laboratories, Inc.
Claire.A.Kammer@us.ul.com
202-296.8092

Beth Keck
Walmart
elizabeth.keck@wal-mart.com

Marci Kinter
Specialty Graphic Imaging Association
marcik@sgia.org
703-359-1313

Bob Kwartin
ICF International
rkwartin@icfconsulting.com

Beth Law
Consumer Specialty Products Association
blaw@cspa.org
202-833-7307

Angie Leith
EPA

Harry Lewis
EPA
lewis.harry@epa.gov
202-564-8642

Amy Lilly
Honda
Amy_Lilly@ahm.honda.com
202-661-4413

Jared MacCleary
Crowell & Moring
jmaccleary@crowell.com
202-508-8954

Brenda Mallory
EPA

Ann Mason
American Chemistry
ann_mason@americanchemistry.com

Steve Mawn
ASTM International
smawn@astm.org
610-832-9726

Jack McAvery
Procter & Gamble
mcavery.j@pg.com
513-983-5948

Ted McDonald
EPA
mcdonald.ted@epa.gov

Fran McPoland
Paper Recycling Coalition
fran.mcp@verizon.net

Jeffrey Miano
Flint Hills Resources
Jeff.Miano@fhr.com
316-828-8746

Beth Miller
Honeywell Aerospace
beth.miller2@honeywell.com
480-592-4097

Brad Miller
Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturers Association (BIFMA) International
bmiller@bifma.org
616-285-3963

Scott Mobley
The Clorox Company
Scott.Mobley@clorox.com

Emile Monette
GSA
emile.monette@gsa.gov

Wayne Morris
AHAM (Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers
wmorris@aham.org
202-872-5955 ext.313

Tanya Mottley
EPA

Sarah O'Brien
Green Electronics Council
sarah.obrien@greenelectronicscouncil.org
802-479-0317

Brendan Owens
U.S. Green Building Council
bowens@usgbc.org
202-828-1153

Colleen Pickford
Information Technology Industry Council
ccleet@itic.org
202-626-5759

America May Pintabutr
World Wildlife Fund
Americamay.pintabutr@wwfus.org

Pat Quinn
The Accord Group
pquinn@theaccordgroup.com
202-289-9800

Jennifer Riddell
EPA
riddell.jennifer@epa.gov
202-566-0706

Jonathan Rifkin
District of Columbia
Jonathan.rifkin@dc.gov
202-724-3676

Pat Rizzuto
BNA, Inc.
prizzuto@bna.com
703-341-3741

Mark Rossolo
Greenguard Environmental Institute
MRossolo@greenguard.org

Zach Rothstein
Keller and Heckman LLP
rothstein@khlaw.com

Amy Schaffer
American Forest & Paper Association
Amy_Schaffer@afandpa.org
202-463-5156

Jeff Scott
EPA
scott.jeff@epa.gov
415-947-8707

Julie Shannon
EPA

Betsy Shaw
EPA
shaw.betsy@epa.gov

Yalmaz Siddiqui
Office Depot
Yalmaz.Siddiqui@OfficeDepot.com
561-438-1718

Betsy Smidinger
EPA
smidinger.betsy@epa.gov

Kathleen Stanton
The American Cleaning Institute
KStanton@cleaninginstitute.org

Jennie Steinhagen
IEEE
j.steinhagen@ieee.org
732-562-3831

Martha Stevenson
E: martha.j.stevenson@gmail.com
434-409-4168

Jay Sweeney
Levi Strauss & Co.
jaysweeney@globalprospectsllc.com

Stephen Sylvan
EPA

Stephanie Tanner
EPA
tanner.stephanie@epa.gov
202-564-4094

Bob Thompson
EPA
thompson.bob@epa.gov

Tom Tillman
EPA

Leanne Tobias
The Green Standard
deborah_dunning@thegreenstandard.org
919-968-6516

Blandine Trouille
DOC
blandine.trouille@trade.gov

Jeff Whitmire
ADTRAN
jeff.whitmire@adtran.com

Margaret Whittaker
ToxServices LLC
mwhittaker@toxservices.com
202-429-8787

Jane Wilson
NSF International
Wilson@nsf.org

Tim Woolheater
EPA
woolheater.tim@epa.gov
404-562-8939