

Green Confusion

Solid Waste Management Fact Sheet No. 18

Efforts by manufacturers to respond to our desire to buy products that are less damaging to the environment has resulted in what has been called a green revolution. Waste reduction is one of those activities. From the paper you write on, to the car you drive, manufacturers are increasingly using recycled materials. Green is becoming a heavily used color on the packaging of many products we routinely purchase. In addition, many labels are printed with environmental claims that can confuse even the most savvy individual.

What can the wise consumer do? First grasping an understanding of what key environmental terms mean or do not mean could be helpful. (see list below). What is the definition of words such as recyclable and biodegradable.

Consumers must continue to think and ask questions. Think about the products you are using? Reevaluate the necessity of some products you select and use routinely. Are there ways to reduce the amount of waste you actually create? What impact is your action having on your family's resources, the community, the state, the country, and the world as a whole? Ask yourself what you would do if you could no longer buy a particular item. Finally, what can you do at the community level that would help others reduce the amount of waste generated and the number of items they consume?

Meanings of Environmental Terms

RECYCLABLE-- the container or item has the potential to be recycled. It does not mean that an item is automatically collected for recycling in your community. Most communities target selected items for collection in their recycling programs. While many items have the potential to be recycled, the question is whether they are being collected for recycling in your area. Many plastic items just are not being recycled by manufacturers in great quantities. Some items are made of several different kinds of materials that are nearly impossible to separate for recycling into new products.

RECYCLED--this means that the product contains some recycled fibers or materials that were once considered waste. This waste could be pre-consumer waste or post-consumer waste. Pre-consumer waste is the scrap or waste from production processes or waste that has never actually been used by a consumer. Actually, manufacturers have been doing that for a

long time. Much pre-consumer waste never has really reached the waste stream. Post-consumer waste is that has been through the hands of consumers. Examples include the newspaper that you read each day, the empty aluminum can that contained your beverage, and the glass jar from the jam you finished at breakfast this morning. Unless a manufacturer prints on the label, the type of recycled fibers (pre- or post-consumer) a product's packaging contains and the percentage of the recycled fiber, we can only guess as to the amount included with any virgin materials in the product.

BIODEGRADABLE--an item will decompose or break down (rot) into simpler components under natural conditions usually with the help of microorganisms, such as bacteria. Modern landfills do not have those conditions (air and water) for microorganisms to do the work necessary for biodegradation to occur. If your waste is going to a landfill, chances are the items will not biodegrade (at least not as rapidly as you might think). Most items might take several decades to decompose. In addition, decay may produce other byproducts that can be just as much of a contaminant to the environment.

PHOTODEGRADABLE--means that sunlight is necessary for a product to break down into simpler components.

Adapted from: Cathy F. Bowen, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Agricultural and Extension Education, Family Public Policy and Consumer Issues, Penn State University, October 20, 1993

Prepared by
William M. Eberle
Extension Specialist, Land Resources



Cooperative Extension Service
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas

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