

Apple Scores Some Points With Environmental Groups, But Not All

Posted by: Peter Burrows on September 25

As we reported in [our story](#) in the magazine this week, Apple has unveiled a revamped environmental section of its website today in which it reveals data critics have been asking the company to disclose for years. Evidently, it's having some effect. I spoke with Meggin Thwift Eastman from KLD Research, which helped Newsweek pull together its annual green rankings. Apple came in 133rd, a poor showing for supposedly progressive Apple. "I took a look, and it seems like a pretty major step forward for the company," she says.

Specifically, she was impressed with Apple's disclosures regarding emission of greenhouse gases. The company copped to a massive 10.2 million cubic tons, vastly more than Dell at 400,000 and Hewlett-Packard at around eight million—despite that they are vastly larger than Apple. The reason is that unlike those companies, Apple is also counting the emissions from all of its suppliers and distributors—from the mining of the copper ore to the recycling of the product. And most significant, Apple says that more than half of the carbon emissions occur in that middle phase, to provide the power when consumers are using their Apple products.

Environmentalists are likely to cheer Apple's decision to step up to broader responsibility for the carbon footprint of its products. And my, how Apple's math would raise the bar for rivals. Imagine if the world's biggest computer makers adopted its carbon accounting method. This is by no means scientific, but HP, tech's largest company, has said that use of its products would increase its carbon emissions by "an order of magnitude." So rather than 8 million cubic tons, it would be on the hook for 88 million tons or so. Dell would approach 10 million, based on its admission that both consumer usage and emissions by its suppliers would both increase its footprint by tenfold.

Those are awfully big numbers—almost too big to be meaningful, says Dane Parker, Dell's director of environment, health and safety. He fears that Apple's definition is so broad as to make a real answer unknowable. How much emissions should Apple be charged for each Intel chip it buys? What's even the best way to measure—by the size of the chip (the bigger, the more raw materials were required) or its energy efficiency? "I don't think they're fudging anything. But I don't think there are sufficiently vetted methodologies" that all companies can follow. "I applaud anyone's effort to drive change, but I'm not sure attaching a carbon footprint to every product

will change consumer's behavior." The best thing Dell can do, he says, is to show how much better it can do on tasks that are totally under its control. "The best thing people can do is change their lightbulbs, insulate their attic and ride their bikes to work. That will be more important than knowing the carbon footprint of your refrigerator," says Parker.

Apple will undoubtedly be asked to prove that its calculations hold up. **Conrad Mackerron of the [As You Sow Foundation](#)**, which filed a shareholder proposal at last year's annual meeting demanding more disclosure on greenhouse gas emissions, says that **"unless Apple is also discloses the data and assumptions on which the LCA is based, and peers do as well, assessing performance relative to industry peers will not be possible."**

Others will argue that Apple's massive admission is a means to divert attention from its own daily operational energy-saving efforts. But Apple CFO Peter Oppenheimer says the company is not taking this for granted. He says the company will convert plants in Ireland and one near Sacramento to run on only renewable energy sources this year, and it has redesigned parts of its Cupertino campus with skylights so that top floors can be lit with natural light. And you can bet that the new campus that Apple is building will have all the green bells and whistles.

Bottom line is that Apple took a big step today to get out of the environmental community's doghouse, but it's not there yet. "Today's disclosures help, but Apple has a long history of not disclosing much of anything," says KLD's Eastman. "So we'll be looking for what kind of progress they make going forward."