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New group to encourage green chemicals

By Mike Verespej

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US environmental, business and public health organizations, as well as socially responsible investor groups, have formed a new organization that its founders hope will further the development of green chemicals and environmentally preferable products.

Two years in the making, the Business-NGO Working Group for Safer Chemicals and Sustainable Materials was officially launched 29 October as a project of the Clean Production Action, a nonprofit environmental group that will initially staff the working group and which has a similar mission. The seeds for the organization were planted two years ago by 22 organizations.

The group is stepping into a void in the marketplace. Just two months ago — citing the lack of federal policy and a similar void — California passed a law to develop a framework for identifying and regulating hazardous chemicals.

The Business-NGO working group immediately published four guiding principles for chemicals policy, and said it was collaborating to develop criteria for more sustainable bio-based plastics with the Sustainable Biomaterials Collaborative and Health Care without Harm

Already, 46 organizations have endorsed the chemicals policy principles, including Kaiser Permanente, Corporate Express, health-car product manufacturer Hospira Inc. and True Textiles Inc., an interior fabric manufacturer.

The principles call for disclosure of the substances associated and used in a product — such as additives — over its lifecycle, and the development of a process to determine whether chemicals have hazardous characteristics, to prioritize chemicals of high concern for elimination and to use chemicals with inherently low hazard potential.

On the sustainability side, the new Business-NGO is focusing first on the food-service sector because of the interest in alternatives related to the expanded polystyrene takeout container bans in California.

“From the plastics side, we are addressing a lot of the life cycle assessments,” particularly with bio-based products, said Mark Rossi, research director, based in Medford, for CPA in a 28 October phone interview. “Just because something is bio-based, doesn’t necessarily mean it is greener. With bio-based materials, you have to look at how the feedstock is grown, what are the hazardous characteristics c additives and what happens at the end of life.

“Our goal is to develop consistent and robust criteria that allow product manufacturers to identify and select materials that are sustainable during their creation, production and end of life cycles,” said Rossi, who heads CPA’s research efforts to identify safer alternatives to products of environment concern.

Rossi also is on the steering committee of HCWH, which, among other things, has worked to urge health care organizations to find substitutes for products that contain mercury, PVC and brominated flame retardants.

The working group hopes to have an implementation guide for how to incorporate the chemical principles into an organization in about months, Rossi said.

"This will not be a 'thou shall' list, but guidelines to show how different entities do it," he said.

In addition, Rossi said the working group will draft and post on its website "biospecs criteria" by year-end for review, and publish final biospecs criteria by the middle of 2010.

"There is demand for information on how to proceed in light of unsubstantiated and spurious green marketing claims," he said. Rossi said the working group's hope is that manufacturers and buyers of products will ultimately ask vendors in the supply chain the same set of questions about bio-based products so everyone can "figure out how to make it greener, more sustainable."

"I think the Biz-NGO group will help the work of shareholders who deal with corporations on these issues," said Michael Passoff, associate director of the corporate responsibility program at As You Sow, a San Francisco organization dedicated to ensuring corporations and institutions act in the best interest of the environment and people.

"There has been significant change over the last couple of years between many corporations and their traditional NGO critics," Passoff said. "There is much more cooperation now. Companies have realized that the government regulatory agencies have failed in their role safeguarding public health from toxic products, and that the fact that something is [Food and Drug Administration] or [Environmental Protection Agency] approved does not protect the company from consumer backlash or litigation."

"Last year's massive toy recalls, and the switch by major companies such as Wal-Mart, Target, and Safeway away from products containing PVC and/or BPA show that industry leaders are no longer relying on the regulatory agencies as the final word," he said.

"NGOs such as Clean Production Action and the Biz-NGO group have been useful in working cooperatively with corporations to set benchmarks and policies that are more realistic based on both the current science and the risk to shareholders," said Passoff. "In fact, I would say that the NGOs are doing a better job of pointing companies to safer products than the industry trade associations are."

The American Chemistry Council and the Society of the Plastics Industry did not respond to requests to discuss the formation of the new working group.

One of the concerns of the Business-NGO working group is the additives that are part of plastics products, Rossi said.

"One of the challenges for plastics manufacturers and bio-based manufacturers is whether their products contain any additives of high concern," Rossi said. "Many small companies are not aware of the additives tossed into their products to improve performance. Companies need to know the big picture and the chemicals of concern they should be moving away from in their own best interest."

"When you evaluate environmental performance, we think there is another variable — additives — that need to be added to that equation," Rossi said. "Companies who do this will be prepared to address these questions. They don't want a crisis to emerge that affects their image. Being pro-active and being ahead of the curve will enable them to manage their brand reputation."

In addition, Rossi said the working group hopes to be a model for collaboration between NGOs and business, to develop tools and continuous improvement criteria and advance policy initiatives for safer chemicals and sustainable materials, to engage in outreach and education and to make the business case for market transformation to safer chemicals and sustainable materials.

* Mike Verespej is a staff reporter at Plastics News, sister publication of PRW.

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