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UP CLOSE: CARPET CARE

Examining Green Carpet Care Chemicals

Today's third-party certifiers put chemicals through stringent testing in order to gain green certification

By Cynthia Kincaid
Email the SM editors

In today's jan/san industry, there is a definite demand for green carpet cleaners. According to a survey by Contracting Profits, a sister publication of Sanitary Maintenance, more than half of building service contractors use them. But with growing greenwashing claims on the rise, it's more important than ever that jan/san distributors be able to assure customers that the green chemicals they sell not only effectively clean carpeting, but also benefit the environmental and the health of janitorial workers and building occupants.

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"It's been the Wild West in terms of claims being made," says Allen Rathey, president of Boise, Idaho-based InstructionLink/JanTrain Inc. "We now have these organizations that are consumer watchdogs in keeping track of these products and what's in them, and that's been a positive thing."

When selling green carpet chemicals, distributors can look for certification from one of the following third-party certifiers to assure customers that products perform as promised and are not making false or misleading claims about their environmental impact.

CRI Seal of Approval

Dalton, Ga.-based Carpet and Rug Institute (CRI) has developed its Seal of Approval certification through the adoption of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Design for the Environment (DfE) program. DfE relies on the EPA's scientific team to rigorously evaluate cleaning products for their impact on human and environmental health.

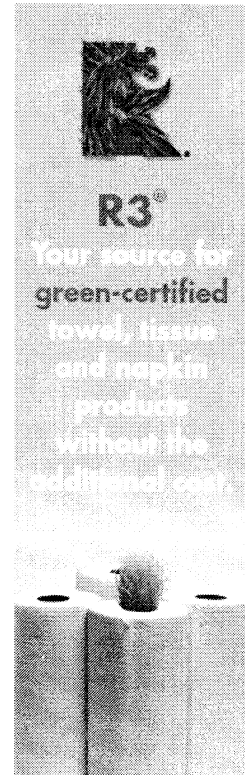
"Rather than CRI creating another green certification program, we decided to go with EPA's DfE program," says Werner Braun, president of the Carpet and Rug Institute. "The EPA has a high credibility rating with the public. Their processes for looking at whether or not a product or chemical is green make good scientific and technical sense."

CRI's program takes a somewhat unique look at the certification process. Where some certifiers might start out testing a cleaning product to see if it's green, Braun thinks

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that approach is backwards.

"At CRI, we start with the premise that if it doesn't clean, it can't be green," he says. "A product first of all has to work on carpet. Then if it passes through that screen, we determine if it's green. And we are absolutely convinced that you can have both."

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CRI's Seal of Approval program for spot removers, pre-spray and in-tank cleaning chemicals are rated using an independent laboratory using scientifically accredited cleaning standards. They are tested for overall cleaning effectiveness, rate of resoiling, pH, surface texture change, optical brighteners and colorfastness.

"For spot removers, we have a battery of 10 to 12 spots that are difficult to remove like red Kool-Aid, motor oil and tar," says Braun. "The chemical has to get the stain out, and it cannot have accelerated resoiling. They cannot discolor the carpet, and they must be safe for human health and the environment."

The EPA's DfE program works directly with the organization's green chemistry specialists, who identify and recommend safer chemicals within distinct functional ingredient classes, such as solvents, surfactants, and chelating agents. This focus allows formulators to use ingredients with the lowest hazards, while still creating high-performing products.

Additionally, if DfE is unable to determine the full "green story" on an ingredient, then the ingredient's chemical structure is scrutinized to better understand the impact on people and the environment. The specialists cast a critical eye on the product's chemical make-up, as well as the chemical structure of its fragrances and dyes.

Green Seal

Green Seal, an independent, non-profit organization that provides science-based environmental certification standards for its cleaning products looks at the whole environmental impact of a product by doing lifecycle studies as part of its standard development process, says Linda Chipperfield, vice president of marketing and outreach for Green Seal, Washington D.C.

"We look at the manufacturing process of a product, and we look at how it performs, which is something that gets lost sometimes," she says.

To be awarded a Green Seal certification, carpet-cleaning chemicals must meet rigorous performance standards.

"We have criteria in our standards," says Chipperfield. "They have to be non-toxic and noncorrosive, they can't contain any carcinogens or reproductive toxins, and they can't deplete the ozone layer. We look not only look at the primary ingredients in a product, we also look at the ingredients in the fragrance."

Green Seal's certification process begins by establishing a standard, which is based on the International Organization for Standardization standards for environmental labeling programs (ISO 14020 and 14024). Once this standard has been established, Green Seal accepts applications for certification. Test data is gathered according to the environmental and performance requirements outlined in the standard (the product shall have a pH between 3-10 and perform as well or better than a conventional, nationally-recognized product in its category and at equivalent product-specific use directions), and then the manufacturing facility is visited to evaluate quality control procedures. If the cleaning products pass the performance requirements and quality control procedures, they are awarded the Green Seal.

EcoLogo Program

Founded in 1988 by the Government of Canada, [EcoLogo](#) environmental standards are now recognized worldwide. Based on the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), EcoLogo compares products and services with others in the same category and is verified by an independent third party.

"You are not eligible for green certification, unless you can demonstrate that you meet fundamental effectiveness criteria," says Scott McDougall, president of TerraChoice, the company

that administers the EcoLogo program.

The EcoLogo Program establishes strict limits on toxicity, toxic chemicals and biodegradability. Carpet cleaning products may not be corrosive or formulated with propellants, halogenated solvents, fluorescent dyes, microbicides or chemicals classified as carcinogenic. Cleaning products must also be readily biodegradable.

The Importance of Certification

So why is the use of certified green carpet cleaners so important? For starters, more organizations and institutions are demanding chemicals that are effective, affordable and environmentally friendly, and this trend is only expected to climb. Companies that fail to use carpet cleaners that meet these criteria could find themselves increasingly losing out.

In fact, some state legislations including New York, Illinois and Hawaii require schools to use green carpet cleaning chemicals, and carpet manufacturers are starting to tie their carpet warranties to the use of green chemicals.

"The six largest carpet manufacturers in the United States, including Shaw, Mohawk and Bolyu, have independently decided to tie their carpet warranties to the exclusive use of CRI Seal of Approval cleaning chemicals and equipment," says CRI's Braun. "If you have someone who is cleaning a carpet that has this requirement, and they are not using Seal of Approval products, it could potentially create some liability for the [company] cleaning the carpet."

The cost of buying, installing and maintaining carpeting can, for some organizations, equate to a major capital investment. Organizations want to protect that investment, while supporting the health of their staff, customers and the environment. Using certified green carpet cleaners could effectively address these issues.

Facilities using green carpet cleaners in their carpet maintenance programs can also positively impact indoor air quality, chemical sensitivities and worker productivity.

"The way we clean our buildings has been closely related to the rates of illness and lost productivity," says McDougall.

The green movement will only continue to get stronger as more supporters join the cause. Chemicals are often the first products end users convert to green in their cleaning programs and carpet chemicals are no exception. To ensure distributors are selling their customers truly green products, they should turn to a third-party certifier to take the guesswork out of the process.

Cynthia Kincaid is a freelance writer based in Portland, Ore.