BUSINESS PURCHASE OF RECYCLED PRODUCTS
Opportunities and Assistance in Wisconsin

The recycling “cycle” works only when materials collected from households, businesses, governments, and industries; processed; and then remanufactured into new, recycled products, which are then in turn purchased by businesses, governments, and the general public. In other words, if recycled products are not purchased, materials will not be collected for recycling into these products.

Recycled products are defined as products manufactured entirely or in part from materials that have been recovered or diverted from solid waste. Recycled content is expressed in terms of post-consumer and recovered materials. Products made with post-consumer material are produced from material that has been recycled by a business or consumers after a product has served its intended use. Recycled products containing recovered or waste material are more broadly defined as those containing solid waste diverted from manufacturing and possibly, but not necessarily, post-consumer sources.

Every state in the U.S., as well as the federal government, has some law or regulation designed to stimulate purchase of recycled products, thereby helping to create markets for recyclables. Most of these laws direct government entities to purchase recycled products, especially paper. A few state laws are directed at private companies, most notably those that require newspaper publishers to use recycled newsprint.

In Wisconsin, local governments are required to purchase recycled products if their use is technically and economically feasible. In addition to these general requirements, every local government unit, including counties, cities, villages, towns, and school districts, is required to ensure that the average recycled content of all paper purchased is not less than 40%. Wisconsin newspaper publishers are required to use newsprint with a 33% minimum recycled content in.
Opportunities for Business Purchase of Recycled Products

The availability of quality, recycled products has increased rapidly over the past several years, giving businesses a myriad of opportunities for making such purchases. Environmental Protection Agency estimates indicate there are nearly 4,500 different products available with recycled content. The box at the right shows some of the products.

There are two basic approaches that businesses can use for recycled product purchases: (1) seek out recycled content products that are readily available as replacements for their non-recycled counterparts; and/or (2) work with vendors to provide cost-competitive recycled-content products if such products are not currently available. The second approach is an aggressive one, where businesses can positively affect recycling by forcing a vendor to make a specific product available or risk losing their customer. McDonald’s, Bank of America, and numerous other U.S. corporations have successfully used this approach to get what they wanted – cost-competitive recycled products. For businesses that want to try the first approach, that of substituting recycled products for those currently purchased, there are a few rules of thumb to keep in mind, as follows.

**Availability:** Expect to find most common products manufactured with recycled content; uncommon products may be more difficult or more costly to obtain. For example, common white office paper products, such as 8½ x 11 copy paper, 8½ x 11 computer paper, and #10 envelopes are readily available, whereas less common sizes may be harder to obtain.

**Performance comparisons:** When shopping for recycled products, realize that some can meet the same product specifications and performance guarantees as their non-recycled counterparts; others cannot. It may be easier to purchase recycled products able to meet existing standard, since existing bid language and purchasing processes can be used. It is also a good idea to review your specifications to ensure current needs are being met.

**Recycled content:** Effective competitive bidding or comparison shopping can best be done when consistent recycled content definitions are used. Use of U.S. EPA definition of recovered material, post-consumer material, and wastepaper has proven to be quite useful, rather than relying on corporate marketing claims of “100 percent recycled.” Purchases that specify “post-consumer waste” can help improve markets for post-consumer recovered materials. Visit the EPA’s “Comprehensive Procurement Guidelines” website for additional guidance. [www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/procure/index.htm](http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/procure/index.htm).

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### A Sample of Recycled Products

#### Office Supplies
- Desk sets and trays
- Markers
- Recharged toner cartridges
- Pens and pencils
- Waste and recycling bins
- Bulletin boards

#### Paper Products
- Printing and writing paper
- Computer paper
- Copy paper
- Note pads
- Calendars
- Envelopes
- Fax paper
- File folders
- Post-it notes
- Greeting cards
- Tissue and towel products
- Corrugated cardboard

#### Plastic Products
- Bags
- Food service trays and containers
- Lumber
- Picnic tables and benches
- Carpet

#### Construction materials
- Asphalt road base
- Plastic drain pipe
- Glass floor tiles
- Roofing insulation and shingles
- Cellulose and fiberglass insulation
- Shower/toilet partitions
- Fence posts and fencing

#### Transportation Products
- Anti-freeze
- Re-refined lube oils
- Pallets (wood, plastic, and metal)
- Road signs
- Retread tires
- Packaging material
- Railroad Ties
Price: Recycled products are not always more expensive than non-recycled products, and prices continue to become more competitive all the time. Taking advantage of joint purchases can dramatically reduce the cost of recycled products. Also, never underestimate the value of shopping around. Vendors, who want to keep their customers, will generally do whatever possible to meet price requirements. Keep in mind that price comparisons also depend on fluctuating prices of virgin products.

Quality: As with any product you will purchase product quality can vary from vendor to vendor. Choosing recycled content products does not mean you will need to compromise your quality standards. Purchasing quality products made from recycled materials must meet the requirements you have set for that particular product. As with all products you purchase some vendors provide a higher quality product than other vendors.

Setting priorities when deciding to make recycled product purchases is very helpful. Many businesses in Wisconsin, looking to save money, purchase recycled products only when they are less expensive than their non-recycled counterparts. Conversely, some businesses, motivated to help stimulate markets for the materials collected in local recycling programs, prioritize post-consumer recycled product purchases, even if it means paying more and rewriting bid specifications to allow for such purchases.

Assistance with Buying Recycled Products

The Wisconsin Department of Administration’s Bureau of Procurement (DOA) provides information that can assist Wisconsin businesses with recycled product purchases. DOA can give businesses information on recycled product listings and vendors, specific product literature, recommended recycled content, and bid language. State government has already revised most statewide contracts for common recycled products using the Clearinghouse as a decision-making resource. While business goals may differ from those of government, the Clearinghouse information can nevertheless be a valuable tool for businesses. DOA’s service is available through their website; http://vendornet.state.wi.us/vendornet/recycle/index.asp.

The US EPA maintains a listing of organizations and websites that are resources for purchasing recycled content goods. EPA uses the term Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) to provide information about products beyond recycled content. Resources can be found here: http://www.epa.gov/epp/. This list of resources also includes third party groups who verify environmentally based claims product suppliers may make. A purchaser can find them confused by many of the terms being used to brand products as being “green.” The EPP program website also provides further information that can help you to evaluate green products and those with recycled content.

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