

Eco-friendly labelling? It's a lot of 'greenwash'

Apr 17, 2009

Catherine Porter

ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

"All-natural" shampoo. "Planet-friendly" glass cleaner. "BPA-free" baby bottles.

The labels on 98 per cent of those good-for-the-earth-and-your-body items you fill your shopping basket with are lying, a new study shows.

Of the more than 2,000 self-described environmentally friendly products in North America examined by the environmental marketing firm TerraChoice, only 25 were found to be indisputably "sin free." The rest were greenwashing, a term environmentalists coined to refer to misleading environmental ads or claims.



"There are dramatically more green products this year than the last," said Scott McDougall, president of TerraChoice, the private company contracted by Environment Canada to oversee its EcoLogo certification program. "But greenwashing is unfortunately more rampant, and it's changing."

A new trend involves companies suggesting they have obtained third-party certification, usually by marking a product with an official-looking stamp that includes language such as "eco-safe."

Greenwashing is especially prevalent in the promotion of cleaning products, cosmetics and children's toys and products, McDougall said.

Of particular concern to parents of young children will be this: All products the group found claiming to be "bisphenol-A free" also appear to be greenwashing. That's because there is no international certification program verifying company claims that their plastic products don't contain the chemical, which in the human body can act like the hormone estrogen and has been linked to cancer and infertility.

BPA has been found in hard plastic materials, including baby bottles. The federal government introduced legislation to ban baby bottles containing it last year.

But, of the companies producing self-proclaimed "BPA-free" products found in 12 large Ottawa stores, TerraChoice couldn't find any indication they had verified their claims with an independent lab, McDougall said.

"We don't have information to know if it's true. It asks a lot of parents to simply trust their claim," said McDougall.

The president of BornFree Canada, creators of the first "bisphenol-A" free bottle to hit Canadian shelves, said the company's baby bottles have indeed been independently tested and proven to be free of the chemical. But it hasn't released the results publicly.

"It is not an industry standard for manufacturers to publicize these studies because they would be very difficult to interpret and understand," said Tony Ferraro.

The Competition Bureau of Canada set out new guidelines for environmental claims last year, but gave industry a year to bring advertisements and labels in line.

The guidelines state that environmental claims "shall be accurate and not misleading" and "shall be substantiated and verified."

But that verification doesn't need to come from a third party, said Dominy McClellan, a senior investigator with the bureau. "They need to provide adequate and proper testing under the act. You can't assume third-party certification is more adequate or proper."

McDougall's firm condensed the guidelines into a "six sins of greenwashing" checklist for consumers. A seventh, the "worshipping false labels" refers to the fact some marketers are mimicking third-party environmental certifications on their products to draw consumers.

In Canada, most transgressions fell into three categories: lack of proof, vague language or "hidden trade-offs" – the practice of emphasizing a product's green aspects while concealing others that are environmentally damaging.

For instance, a "green" pad of paper might have come from sustainably logged trees but been milled in an ancient, carbon-dioxide spewing mill that still uses dioxin-producing chlorine to bleach the pulp, he said.

"It's like a magician drawing attention to the left hand so you can't see what the right hand is doing."