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Environmental certification becoming increasingly crowded and contested field

By Juliet Eilperin
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As consumers and businesses have begun to seek green products in recent years, environmental certification has become an increasingly crowded -- and contested -- field.

About 600 labels worldwide -- 80 in the United States -- are issued by companies and nonprofit organizations that offer a promise of environmentally friendly qualities, according to a new survey by the World Resources Institute, Duke University and the environmental analyst Big Room Inc. They cover almost every category imaginable -- from textiles to tea and tourism, from forest products to food.

The labels say whether shade-grown organic coffee is "Bird Friendly" (courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution's Migratory Bird Center) or Gibson guitars were made without harming tropical forests (thanks to the Rainforest Alliance).

But because certification is a self-regulated industry, the integrity of these labels varies wildly. The best certification systems have brought increased accountability to markets that used to be largely unregulated. Many others make environmental claims that cannot be proved, prompting the Federal Trade Commission to file charges against some manufacturers.

Eco-certifications, as many consultants and activists call them, cover about 15 percent of the bananas traded in the world, 12 percent of wild fisheries, 10 percent of global forestry products and 7 percent of the global coffee market.

Four out of the five top tea companies worldwide have agreed to buy tea from Rainforest Alliance-certified farms. Oxfam and the United Farm Workers are working on a certification system for fruits, vegetables and flowers that would address consumers' concerns about the environment, food safety and workers' rights.

"These kinds of certification systems have definitely moved from the avant-garde, and are seen at the very least as an up-market, premium product," said Steve Rochlin, senior partner at AccountAbility, an international sustainability consulting firm. "What these need to do is to double, treble, quadruple -- at least -- the amount of certified product they have out in the market in the next five years, to replace what we would normally buy on the grocery store shelves."

But the money at stake over which group's certification standards become the norm has made these systems a battlefield, delaying their widespread implementation in some cases.

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The U.S. Green Building Council -- which oversees the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards -- has held several comment periods to determine which kind of wood builders should buy if they want to earn points towards meeting the group's environmental requirements, and it's still not done. The contest pits the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) -- a group that certifies which logging operations do the best at preserving tropical forests and natural ecosystems -- against the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), an effort by the U.S. and Canadian timber industries to operate working forests in a more environmentally friendly manner.

The two standards differ in key ways: The Forest Stewardship Council puts a greater emphasis on ecosystem protection and the rights of indigenous peoples, and it bans the use of genetically modified trees. The Sustainable Forestry Initiative is seen by many small landowners in the United States and Canada as less onerous to comply with but still helpful to the impacts of logging.

Fred Cabbage, an N.C. State University professor who has served as an independent reviewer to ensure the SFI system is rigorous, said that although FSC certification yields a slightly better environmental outcome, there are not "huge" differences between the two standards.

But environmental leaders of 16 U.S. and Canadian organizations disagree and have urged the Green Building Council to reject SFI's bid for LEED certification. "This is about high v. low standards in forest management and forest protection," they wrote in a March 28 letter.

Similar fights are happening across a variety of industries. Over the past decade, the Marine Stewardship Council has helped redefine fishing by evaluating the sustainability of wild fisheries across the globe. Major purchasers, including Wal-Mart and Loblaw, Canada's largest food retailer, have pledged to sell only sustainable seafood by 2011 and 2013, respectively.

As suppliers have demanded more MSC-certified products, its reach has expanded. Five years ago, it had certified 14 fisheries and had 19 under review. Now, 71 have earned the label, and 127 are being assessed. But the group is drawing criticism for considering certification for fisheries in sensitive areas, such as the Ross Sea Antarctic toothfish fishery and the Antarctic krill fishery. Some scientists do not think krill should be caught for human consumption because it serves as the basis for the Antarctic food chain. And the demand for Chilean sea bass (the commercial name for toothfish) has become so intense that some wonder whether they can be fished sustainably at this point.

"When you provide certification, it sends a signal to consumers that everything's okay," said Jim Barnes, executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, which opposes certification for the Ross Sea toothfish.

In the meantime, federal regulators are trying to crack down on the most egregious greenwashing. EcoLogo, a consultant on verification, surveyed more than 2,200 North American products in 2008 and 2009 and found that more than 98 percent lacked proof to justify their claims.

The FTC is going to issue a [new guide for environmental marketing claims](#) within a few months and has filed charges against textile manufacturers for deceptively labeling and advertising items as made of bamboo fiber when they were made of rayon and for selling biodegradable products that didn't degrade in landfills.

"The government has a role in policing the marketplace," said James A. Kohm, associate director of the FTC's enforcement division. When it comes to environmental claims, he added, customers often find themselves wondering, "I don't really know if I've gotten exactly what I've wanted, or if I've been ripped

off."

Staff researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.

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