

**I**N OUR ENLIGHTENED consumer society, ingredients and chemical additives are stated by law, on the container. No longer can you unwittingly poison yourself or your environment. As a consumer with a green conscience, that should make you happy. But does it?

The flyspray can states clearly that it contains "no fluorocarbons". Greenie points there. But on closer inspection you find that it contains tetramethrin, d-phenothrin and piperonyl butoxide.

What do they do? According to the label they kill flies, ants, pets, birds and goldfish – so will they stunt the children, give you migraines, or poison the garden? No consumer can possibly be knowledgeable about all the effects of these chemicals.

Information is only useful if you can understand and judge it, and many shoppers yearn for the certainty of an interpreting and trustworthy label, awarded by an impartial body.

So it was with high hopes that I joined the government-sponsored Environmental Choice Management Advisory Committee (ECMAC) set up to advise and advance a labelling system for "green" merchandise. Two years later, sadder and wiser, I report.

**M**EASURING environmental costs is like peeling the scales of an onion. The more you peel the more scales are revealed. Every product we buy passes through many stages during its life. First there is the collection of the raw materials, which often involves mining or logging. Then there are the manufacturing processes, the transport and sale of the product, its use, and finally its disposal. At every stage impacts occur which may pollute the soil, water or air, and degrade ecosystems.

The process of assessing all these environmental costs is called *cradle-to-grave assessment* or *life-cycle analysis*. The process is enormously difficult, time-consuming and expensive, and the moral judgements it poses make the eyes water. The unpalatable truth revealed, unfortunately, is that the label "environmentally friendly" is dishonest, and every manufactured product has an environmental impact. Even the best independent life-cycle analysis depends on a choice of modelling assumptions and methodology. In the end it eventually comes down to value judgements about the comparison of dissimilar impacts.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CHOICE

THE

# GREEN DILEMMA



*New Zealand shoppers will soon have some help in choosing products on environmental grounds.*

*ANN GRAEME, Forest and Bird representative on the committee set up to devise an environmental labelling scheme, looks at some of the problems and pitfalls.*

There can also be a problem in determining how much waste is produced in making, for example, a particular washing machine because of the complexity and commercial secrecy of some of the manufacturing processes.

Another issue is that with many products it is not the manufacture of the product itself but the use of it during its lifetime that has the greatest environmental impact. Research on washing machines and dishwashers in Britain indicates that the environmental effects of energy, water and detergent use outweigh any other problems. Thus it is less important what resources are used and what waste generated in the manufacture of washing machines than how energy-efficient they are over their lifetimes.

After a bout of indigestion caused by a surfeit of ideals, the Environmental Choice committee has settled for a pragmatic and honest approach to our stated aim "to improve the quality of the environment by minimising the adverse environmental impacts generated by the production, distribution, use and disposal of products". To this end we use the qualifying label of "environmentally preferable".

As the Environmental Choice task groups, comprising members of the committee and co-opted experts, set out to investigate the chosen product categories, it became apparent that, far from an exhaustive life-cycle analysis, we were concentrating on the most obvious environmental feature of each product. In the case of recycled paper and recycled plastic prod-

ucts, the chosen feature was the percentage of recycled material. In the case of lead-acid batteries, the chosen feature was the percentage of recycled lead in the battery.

Critics will argue that this leaves layers of potential environmental impacts unexplored. So it does. But the committee does not have the resources to carry out full life-cycle analyses. Instead we aim to label honestly what we judge to be aspects of products offering the potential for some significant environmental gains to New Zealand.

Lead-acid batteries provide a good example of the committee's philosophy. These batteries account for about 80 percent of the inorganic lead used in New Zealand, and they are far from environmentally "friendly". Their production involves the mining and smelting of lead,