



CONSUMERS' INSTITUTE

Environmental "friendliness" is a relative concept only. All manufactured goods create an impact on the environment. The Environmental Choice scheme will give consumers an independent assessment of whether over the life of a product these impacts have been kept as benign as possible.

recycled plastic products, laundry, hand and machine dishwashing detergents, and torch and hearing-aid batteries. By the end of the year, criteria will be developed on paper, paints and re-refined oil. Products carrying the environmental choice logo will hopefully soon be available in the shops.

OVERSEAS, the Japanese Eco-Mark Scheme, launched in 1989, has given 850 labels to 31 kinds of products. Canada's Environmental Choice has been awarding labels since 1990, mainly to recycled and low-pollution products. So far it has licensed about 60 products in 18 categories. The longest-running scheme is Germany's Blue Angel. It has been awarding labels since 1978, and a 1988 poll found that 79 per cent of German consumers recognised the label.

As the pioneer system, Blue Angel has attracted a lot of criticism. For instance, it gives eco-labels to aerosol deodorants which do not contain the ozone-depleting CFCs, yet not to the roll-on kind. Wine bottle labels made of recycled paper wear the Blue Angel, prompting concern that the bottle and the wine inside may receive undeserved kudos.

The New Zealand scheme is trying to avoid such pitfalls and learn from the apparent mistakes. Manufacturers of plastic containers, for example, will not normally be able to use the logo on the

container unless the contents are also licensed.

The New Zealand programme is adopting generic criteria similar to those of the Canadian Environmental Choice programme. It was hoped that a system compatible with Australia could be developed, but recently Australia has set out on quite a different tack. Instead of setting product standards and inviting manufacturers to reach them, Environmental Choice Australia intends to check out the truthfulness of environmental claims made by the manufacturers themselves. This may be useful to the consumer, but does not meet the New Zealand aim of raising standards.

The Environmental Choice committee is very conscious that mistakes would damage the credibility of the scheme, so we are progressing with caution. Certainly, New Zealanders will not see a flood of eco-labels, and that is a good thing. If the labels are to raise product standards, they need to be awarded sparingly. But, on the other hand, if too few products qualify, or too few product categories are involved, we risk losing the interest of manufacturers and consumers.

Another dilemma to face is the many products that fall into the "too hard" category. For example recyclable materials offer more obvious environmental criteria – and attract more eco-labels – than household cleaners. Indeed some schemes exclude all such cleaning products on the grounds that even the best cause too

How it works

ENVIRONMENTAL Choice is a product certification programme run by Telarc (the Testing Laboratory Registration Council of New Zealand) which was set up by the government in 1972 to ensure that the highest possible technical standards are met in the industrial and commercial sectors.

The Environmental Choice scheme is voluntary. Manufacturers and importers may apply to Telarc to have their products measured against the appropriate specification. If the product measures up it will be licensed to carry the Environmental Choice logo for up to three years. Telarc will run spot checks to ensure the product remains up to standard, and the licence may be revoked if necessary.

much harm. Yet it is precisely these products – detergents, washing powder and cleaners – that shoppers worry most about. Therefore a scheme that shies away from the difficult issues will be of limited service to consumers and less use to the environment.

So we engage in a balancing act. Encouraging manufacturers to raise their standards, without putting them off with impossible goals, yet not debasing the scheme with "jelly baby" standards. Endorse too few products and lose public identity. Endorse too many and lose credibility.

Whatever the committee resolves will attract criticism. I don't think this makes the environmental labelling programme worthless. We are all consumers, and a modest, pragmatic, ethical scheme, even if controversial, is better than no scheme at all.

Per person, Australians and New Zealanders consume about 17 times as much of the world's resources as people in the poorest nations. While nobody wants to be poor, there is no escaping the fact that we are the world's big spenders and that the world cannot sustain Western consumptive habits for ever.

The more I enter into the minefield of environmental assessments, the more I realise that the greenest consumer is a modest consumer. Tread lightly in the market and your tread will be lighter on the environment. ♦



Ann Graeme is Forest and Bird's education officer and is based in Tauranga.