

## Environmental Choice at the Supermarket



*The Environmental Choice New Zealand logo, intended to help consumers source products which do not harm the environment, is beginning to appear in some supermarkets, after nearly 10 years in development. The Associate Minister for the Environment, Marie Hasler, (pictured) has presented Environmental Choice licences to the Elite range of household tissue products which joins a limited list of paints and carpets to carry the 'eco-labelling', licensed on behalf of the Minister for the Environment. The scheme was introduced as an incentive to businesses 'to reduce adverse effects of products on the environment', and so consumers would have an environmental label they could rely on.*

**T**he Government-endorsed environmental labelling programme, Environmental Choice New Zealand, has now reached supermarket shelves, recognizing a range of household tissue products as 'easing the burden on the environment.' This is the first range of household products to be recognized by the label in the 10 years since Environmental Choice was established.

'The reason for the time delay has been the process of establishing local standards for products to meet,' explains Melissa Arseneault who runs the Environmental Choice programme. So far the organization has established 16 product specifications, including environmental labelling requirements for hand dish-washing detergents, laundry detergents, woollen carpets, recycled plastics, paints, re-refined lubricating oil and lead acid batteries. Standards have also been set for paper products, including paperboard, fine papers, newsprints, sanitary paper and some products from recycled paper.

The response so far has been limited to a handful of manufacturers: the Environmental Choice label can now be found on a range of Resene Paints, the Levene range of paints now produced by Dulux, some wool and wool-rich carpets from Feltex Carpets, and egg cartons moulded from recycled paper by Premium Packaging. The Gracefield Elite range of household tissue products is the first to gain the Environmental Choice label in the categories for recycled and sanitary paper products.

'It took a number of years to establish the first product specifications and this work is continuing,' says Melissa Arseneault. 'We work with international organizations, such as the Global Ecolabelling Network, and the International Organization for Standardization, and then develop our own standards.'

'New Zealand manufacturers have been slow to pick up on the advantages of eco-labelling but this advance onto the supermarket shelves will serve as an example for others to fol-

low,' she says. 'It's a matter of getting the concept better known both with consumers and manufacturers.'

Currently, the Environmental Choice programme is developing product specifications for printing inks and cleaners.

'Obviously, as our range of specifications is widened, more manufacturers can seek to join the eco-labelling programme,' she says. Product specifications are drawn up through a public process where the Environmental Choice Management Advisory Committee advertises its intention to establish environmental standards. A task force from industry, regional councils and other key people develop the proposed specification and the published draft is then reviewed by public submissions again.

Not only is the process time-consuming, but technology and overseas practices change, hence the specifications are regularly reviewed. The zinc air battery specification, for example, is already obsolete, and indeed unnecessary, as manufacturers worldwide have ceased to use

mercury for environmental reasons.

'This is the kind of success eco-labelling is achieving internationally,' says Melissa Arseneault. 'An Environmental Choice label should help our exporters also.'

Environmental Choice labelling is managed by a not-for-profit organization, International Accreditation New Zealand, acting on behalf of the Minister for the Environment. It is advised by an independent committee of citizens and officials, formally appointed by the Testing Laboratory Registration Council, to ensure there is a balanced representation of technical, environmental, consumer and industry concerns. Members who list conservation allegiances among their qualifications are Dr Lesley Syme, an environmental psychologist and member of Forest and Bird, and Barbara Hammonds, a mathematics teacher, and supporter of Friends of the Earth and the Environment and Conservation Organizations of New Zealand.