



ENERGY FOCUS

A “Green” World Can Be Elusive

By Adam Wasch, Energy Outreach Consultant for CCHRC and CES

Green is a one-word metaphor for earth-friendly. Or good health. It might refer to renewable products. Surely you’ve heard of sustainable. Bio-based? Organic? How about socially responsible? Who’s responsible for this? More often than not, marketers are – that’s who. So be careful whose claims you believe.

All products present tradeoffs between cost, quality, and convenience. And every product affects the environment or our health in some way. These impacts can be measured by considering what ingredients go into making a product, the energy used during the manufacturing process, and the fuel consumed to transport products to market. How long a product lasts and if it can be recycled are additional concerns.

Your definition of “green” will vary based on your criteria. For example, recycling is generally thought to be a green practice, but not always. In Fairbanks, recycling glass can consume more energy than it saves because of the transportation involved. Plus, glass requires a lot of energy to clean and transform for other use. Because glass is inert and not especially damaging when buried, recyclers tend to focus instead on recycling metal or plastics.

Is it better to operate an efficient oil furnace or burn wood, which is renewable, but typically produces less efficient heat and causes more air pollution? Fairbanks relies on electricity produced by burning coal, but even clean coal technologies produce hazardous waste. Emissions control systems prevent pollutants from entering our air, but these pollutants still have to be stored.

Some green ideas seem to strike at the heart of our values. For example, it is more efficient and impacts the environment less when people live in multifamily housing units, use public transportation, and reside in temperate climate zones. This pretty much excludes the way of life loved by many Alaskans. Should we move?

Green thinking can quickly become politicized if people feel it infringes on their way of life or threatens their economic security. This is why the most highly marketed green ideas emphasize efficiency and economy. Few people balk when they are encouraged to weatherize their homes because, over time, it will save them money. Or, if investing in renewable energy technologies such as electric cars creates much-needed jobs, then doing so will likely receive widespread support.

Most of us aren't up for all this navel gazing. We just want a way to help our communities, enjoy clean air and water, and live more healthily. Here's a short checklist on how to do your part, without getting too complicated:

- Use salvaged products – The best way to reduce unnecessary consumption is to reuse as much as you can, in part or whole.
- Recycle – If you can recycle it, then do. Buy products with high percentages of post-consumer recycled content or are remade from waste product. Use reusable fabric grocery bags instead of the disposable plastic ones.
- Buy products that last – Durable, well-made products will be replaced less often and in the long run can save you money.
- Buy local – Using material and food products that are made close to home saves all kinds of energy and will help to support your community.
- Minimize your use of toxic or poisonous substances – Vinegar and soap can often be just as effective as that glowing green stuff that comes out of yet another plastic bottle.
- Favor renewable resources – Support solar-, wind-, and hydropower when reasonable. Conserve non-renewable fuels by using them as efficiently as possible.

Too much hullabaloo about what is or isn't the most right thing to do can distract from the underlying point: being even a lighter shade of green can help to preserve our environment *and* our way of life.

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