

Memo

From: Beth Eckl, Practice GreenHealth  
Date: April 4, 2008  
Subject: Specifications for Cleaning Supplies

In response to your request, below are recommendations for one of the upcoming contracts, cleaning supplies. I have provided background information on the environmental issues involved with these products and our recommended specifications. I would be glad to discuss any of these elements with you.

### **Cleaning Supplies**

**Background:** Adoption of environmentally preferable cleaning chemicals is important for many reasons:

Worker health and safety: Janitorial workers are one of the most likely worker classifications to suffer injuries on the job, primarily burns and blinding from caustic substances. One study found that 35% of conventional cleaning products can cause blindness, severe skin damage or damage to organs through the skin.

Environmental damage: Cleaning products that contain phosphorous are associated with algal blooms in water bodies that kill aquatic organisms. Some contain alkylphenol ethoxylate surfactants, which persist in the environment and are linked to hormone disruption in exposed organisms.

Patient and staff comfort: Many cleaning products contain high levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which can give rise to respiratory irritation, headaches and other symptoms.

Long term health issues: A surprising number of cleaning products contain known or probable carcinogens, and substances associated with reproductive organ damage, birth defects, kidney damage, neurological impacts and other serious health effects.

As the market for environmentally friendly cleaning products has expanded, many manufacturers make environmental claims that are difficult to verify or assess. Clearly, product review committees or contract staff would find it challenging to take on the immense burden of reviewing individual lab data on specific products to assess environmental impacts. Third party certification can provide assurance that a given product has been independently tested and found to meet a specific set of criteria which verifiably reduce its negative environmental and health impacts. It also ensures that a program of repeat verification and factory inspection is in place to ensure continuing compliance.

In the US, a nonprofit organization called Green Seal has established product standards for cleaning products based on a combination of performance specifications and environmental criteria. Their process is open, and includes feedback from health and environmental experts as well as manufacturers and end users. Green Seal has developed three standards for janitorial chemicals:

1. GS 37 standard for Industrial and Institutional Cleaners (including General-Purpose, Bathroom, Glass, and Carpet Cleaners),
2. GS 40 standard for Industrial and Institutional Floor-Care Products (Floor Finishes and Strippers), and
3. GS-41 standard for Industrial and Institutional Hand Soaps.

The standards can be found at <http://www.greenseal.org/certification/environmental.cfm> and lists of certified products can be found at <http://www.greenseal.org/findaproduct/index.cfm>. There are hundreds of certified cleaning products under GS-37. Note that the list of certified hand soaps under GS-41 contains mostly foam-based soaps.

**Suggested Specification:**

Based on broad support for Green Seal's standards and the rapidly expanding market for green cleaners, we recommend the following specification.

**Definitions:**

*Green Seal – An independent, non-profit environmental labeling organization. Green Seal standards for products and services meet the U.S. EPA's criteria for third-party certifiers. The Green Seal is a registered certification mark that may appear only on certified products.*

**Product Specific Performance:**

*Contractor must provide cleaning products in the following seven categories that meet the Green Seal Standards for Industrial and Institutional Cleaners (GS-37), Industrial and Institutional Floor Care Products (GS-40), and Industrial and Institutional Hand Cleaners (GS-41). See [www.greenseal.org](http://www.greenseal.org) for the standards and lists of certified products. These seven categories include:*

1. *General Purpose Cleaners*
2. *Bathroom Cleaners*
3. *Glass Cleaners*
4. *Carpet Cleaners*
5. *Floor Cleaners*
6. *Floor Care: Finishes and Strippers*
7. *Hand Cleaners and Hand Soaps<sup>1</sup>*

Please let me know if you have questions about this information. I can be reached at (925) 838-2731 (PST).

Practice Greenhealth thanks its [EPP Supporters](#) for their contributions to the creation of this resource.



---

<sup>1</sup> At this time, Green Seal has certified mostly foam soaps for the GS-41 Standard. This may not apply if liquid soaps are specified.