

Buying green, supporting farmers

Program registers biobased products

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SAN ANTONIO — The lawn outside the Agriculture Department's headquarters in Washington is green in more ways than one.

Several weeks ago, Agriculture began applying a fertilizer made from natural materials to the grounds of the Whitten building, nixing the typical pesticide-laden synthetic fertilizer that can harm the environment.

By choosing the alternative fertilizer, Agriculture achieved two benefits. It met a federal requirement to give buying preference to products made from biological or agricultural materials and, at the same time, supported the Agriculture-run program that registers those biobased products.

Agriculture's supplier, Bio Green USA of Reno, Nev., offers one of 1,200 products certified under the department's BioPreferred program. The products run the gamut, from biodegradable cutlery and plant-based cleaning supplies to motor oils made from animal fats and soy-based roofing systems.

"This is not a little industry," said Ron Buckhalt, who manages the BioPreferred program.

For nearly two years, agencies have been required to buy biobased products to the maximum extent possible. But many have been slow to comply. The new program competes for attention with nearly a dozen other green-related procurement programs that give priority to products made from recycled content, those certified under the Energy Star label, those that don't deplete the ozone, and those made from renewable materials.

"It's tough to break through the noise. There are lots of competing requirements," said Cory Claussen, a staffer for Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, who championed the BioPreferred program because it helps agencies meet green procurement requirements while supporting the agricultural industry.

Interest in the program is rising, however, as evidenced by the more than 100 BioPreferred companies promoting their wares earlier this month at the General Services Administration's 2009 Expo



AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT

Karen Coble Edwards, right, of the United Soybean Board, says events such as the GSA Expo in San Antonio earlier this month help spread the word about biobased products.

here. Agriculture showcased 30 up-and-coming vendors who aren't yet available through GSA supply schedules at its own BioPreferred exhibit, double the number who participated last year.

Procurement experts and companies say the chief barrier to expanding the program is education. Some agencies are unaware of the program or how to obtain the products, which are listed at www.biopreferred.gov and can be purchased either through existing GSA schedules or directly from vendors using purchase cards.

There are misperceptions that the quality of biobased products isn't as good as traditional products, even though many of the products are as good if not better than those made from petroleum-based materials, many agencies say.

Federal buyers also are reluctant to spend more up front for the products, even though they cost the same or less as competing products when life-cycle factors such as manufacturing, transportation and disposal are considered.

"We're asking the federal workforce, which has never been rewarded for thinking like this, to be foot soldiers," said Shelley Fidler, who oversaw federal environmental policy issues during the Clinton administration and is now a principal at Van Ness Feldman, a Washington law firm whose clients include the U.S. Green Building Council.

Federal agencies are serving as the test bed for expanding the use

of biobased products to a broader national audience and should be commended for what they've done so far, Fidler said.

"Things are moving very quickly and in the right direction," she said. "But there's a lot of marketing and education yet to be done."

A recent survey conducted for the United Soybean Board showed that 65 percent of Americans are unaware of biobased products, even though they're increasingly being incorporated into everyday products and being sold commercially by national retailers such as Home Depot and AutoZone, the board's Karen Coble Edwards said. Nearly 40 furniture companies use soy-based foam in their furniture, including Crate and Barrel, La-Z-Boy, Simmons and Martha Stewart.

Agriculture is finalizing a new labeling program for BioPreferred products that it hopes will raise awareness of the products, much as Energy Star has for electronics and appliances. The proposed rule on the labeling program is expected to be issued for public comment this summer.

Events such as the GSA Expo and recognition programs such as the White House Closing the Circle Awards are helping to spread the word about biobased products and encouraging more federal agencies to participate.

"We know it takes a lot of different people in the chain to make that happen," Edwards said. ■