

FROM: ATHGO group # 6, Los Angeles 2008  
SUBJECT: Green Labeling

I. As global awareness of the anthropogenic contribution to climate change through the unprecedented release of greenhouse gases (GHGs) has grown in recent years, consumers have become increasingly concerned with their own personal impact.

II. Consumers in the United States strongly believe in the power they wield through their purchasing choices. This power not only applies to the ability to change their own individual footprint, but also to the potential to influence the businesses who depend on them. As their awareness and concern grows, consumers in every strata of society are interested in making informed purchasing decisions with regard to the environmental impact of the product. This information needs to be nationally required, readily available, easy to understand, and consistent across all consumer products. As the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act has shown through its implementation of nutrition labels, when the information presented meets the above criteria, the method of labeling products is effective in disseminating information to consumers that is used in purchasing decisions.

III. We recommend a federally mandated “Green Label” system wherein each consumer product must have a label – of federally standardized design and content – that reveals its environmental impact. Accurate and relatively simple ways of measuring environmental impact are well known in the scientific community. We propose following global ANSI (American National Standards Institution) standards in impact determination owing to economic globalization. The label should include information on the GHGs emitted throughout the life cycle of the product. That information should be presented in a simple, graphical format and include an easy metric for comparison between products within the same product class.

Collateral gains of these “Green Labels” are threefold. First, domestic products will be favored due to lower transportation costs. This may initiate a feedback producing an overall reduction in transportation GHG emissions and a strengthening of American industry. Secondly, companies required to label products for American markets may find it beneficial in international markets, promoting the global spread of “Green Labels”. Thirdly, in calculating product impacts, companies may identify internal potential for increases in efficiency and economic benefits to alternative energy use, ultimately reducing their overall GHG emissions and promoting the development of the alternative energy sector.

In order for this system to be maximally effective, consumer education will be critical. This education will need to encompass: basic information regarding the underlying concern, global climate change, and the human role in its progress; information on the importance and potential impact of informed consumption; and simple guidelines for interpreting the labels. This education should be spread through widely consumed media, with careful attention paid to equal distribution of information across all elements of society.

IV. In closing, we feel that this proposal harnesses the considerable power of informed consumption through the democratization of information and uses it to address the pressing concern of global climate change. The next step is to design the metrics and graphics of a label prototype and to begin the process of federal policy adoption.