

Sustainable Product Purchasing Guide for Commercial Project Teams

When commercial project teams are pursuing healthy and high-performing buildings, the materials and products they choose have a major impact on sustainability goals.

Any selected product should:

- Lower the environmental footprint of the project
- Contribute to ongoing sustainability
- Support human health of manufacturers, installers, and building users.

Considerations

Systems Thinking	Embodied Carbon
Consider how a particular product will contribute to other goals of the building project. For example, for products related to the building envelope - exterior walls, roof, windows, doors - additional factors may impact final selection due to the importance of the envelope in the ongoing efficiency of the building.	Embodied carbon speaks to the total amount of carbon emitted in the making of a product or building project. The embodied carbon of all products used in a building along with the building's construction activities provide the entire embodied carbon of a building project.
Durability	Regionality
Products that are durable, long-lasting, and easy to maintain support ongoing sustainability in that they reduce the need for replacements.	Specifying regional materials and products delivers layered benefits. This practice supports the local economy, reduces embodied carbon from product transport, aligns the project with regional resources, and can reduce delays in procurement.



Questions to Ask Product Suppliers

The superpower of a material specifier or buyer is in their ability to ask questions. These questions signal to suppliers that there is demand for healthier and more sustainable products – and the practice of asking questions has become a successful tool in market transformation. Here are a few to start with:

- **Does this product have a health or sustainability label?**
- **Can you tell me about your manufacturing practices?**
- **Does your product contain [insert ingredient here]?**

Best Practices

- **Consider salvage and reuse first.** When possible, reuse existing buildings and salvage materials from the project site or other nearby projects. Lack of available information regarding salvaged products can be a drawback to this practice, so extra care may be needed to avoid products that contain materials such as lead or asbestos. However, reuse should always be considered before new construction or purchasing new materials due to lower embodied carbon.
- **Never copy and paste a specification from another project.** All projects are unique and have unique opportunities to align sustainability, functionality, and beauty. Be thoughtful with each specification.
- Design firms should work to **pre-vet their specification books** for health and sustainability, so it becomes easier to pull products that already meet certain criteria.
- Until project teams have more seamless specification processes for health and sustainability criteria (and the market provides them with more choices), teams should **assign at least one person to product and material vetting** as their main responsibility.
- **Align your values with your purchasing practices.** In addition to health and sustainability goals, consider how your purchasing power can support small companies and women-, minority-, or veteran-owned businesses.
- **Prioritize the building user.** While it is possible to achieve both health and sustainability goals with thoughtful purchasing, the building user should determine the highest priorities of the project.



Product Labels to Look For

There are many product labels and certifications relating to sustainability, and some are more robust than others. Here is a sampling of reliable labels that support green building projects and certifications.

Environmental Product Declaration (EPD)	A document that transparently communicates the environmental performance or impact of any product or material over its lifetime.
Living Product Challenge	A framework for manufacturers to create products that are free from Red List ingredients, generate environmental benefits, and positively impact the community.
Declare Label	Manufacturers voluntarily disclose product information on Declare labels, which are accessible on a free database created by the International Living Future Institute.
Cradle2Cradle	A multi-attribute standard used globally across industries for designing and making products that enable a healthy, equitable and sustainable future.
UL GREENGUARD	This certification helps manufacturers make and market products with low chemical emissions that contribute to healthier indoor air.

*The Appalachian Sustainable Products Network (ASPN) is working to equip Upper Appalachia to meet increasing residential and commercial sector demand for the products and materials used to construct, renovate, maintain and operate resilient, energy-efficient buildings and infrastructure, and connect buildings to a cleaner grid. ASPN is funded by the **Appalachian Regional Commission's Appalachian Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARC ARISE)**, together with support from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation. For more information, contact info@gbapgh.org.*



Appalachian Sustainable
Products Network



Green
Building
Alliance

ASPNbuidls.org