



Green Can Be Just as Mean

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In recent years, sustainability or “going green” have become a major motivating force for private and public-sector organizations. The reasons for becoming sustainable and “going green” are certainly numerous, desirable and welcomed! However, there is often a misconception among organizations, employers, employees and consumers that “green jobs or green products” are safe or safer than traditional jobs.

The reality is that while they are more “environmentally friendly,” most green jobs or products pose similar (and sometimes additional) safety and health hazards for workers and consumers than traditional jobs or products. Safety professionals are therefore often faced with the added challenge of educating the users and ensuring that adequate safety practices and procedures are not ignored simply because the work or product carries the title of “green”!

While the end result of a “green job or green product” is ultimately a more sustainable or environmentally safer outcome, it’s important to understand that sustainability and safety are not synonymous. One of the best examples of how a sustainable or “green” product poses new hazards to the consumer is the change from incandescent light bulbs to fluorescent bulbs. The hazard to the consumer with the energy inefficient incandescent bulbs was largely limited to skin cuts due to breakage of the bulbs. However, with the switch to energy efficient fluorescent (piggy tail) bulbs the hazards to the consumer was no longer just the skin cuts due to bulb breakage, but also the new hazard of exposure to mercury when a fluorescent bulb was broken!

Likewise, employee tasks during a “green job” installation or operation carry the same and sometimes additional safety and health hazards as traditional jobs. A good example of this would be a solar panel roof installation. While the completed solar panel installation is considered a green job with a highly desirable energy conservation factor, the workers installing the solar roof panels are still exposed to many of the same hazards (e.g., fall hazards, heat stress, equipment and tool hazards, lifting) as a traditional roof installer.



Let's also consider the new generation of "green" paints for homes and offices. Workers and homeowners commonly consider these paints as "non-toxic" because they contain low (or zero) Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) or are water-based rather than oil based. However, a quick glance at the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) of one of the "green" paints will show that they still contain a significant percentage (albeit reduced in comparison to traditional or oil-based paints) of ingredients posing dermal, inhalation or carcinogenic hazards. Therefore, all persons should still take appropriate safety precautions when applying or sanding these paints.



No doubt about it ... going green is highly worthwhile and necessary in order to conserve our resources and to make our world more sustainable for future generations. Taking the time to understand and minimize the potential hazards of a green job or product is highly worthwhile and necessary in order to conserve the health and safety of our workers and public.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Maria Mitchell is the former Manager of Risk Management & Safety for Miami-Dade County. She has over thirty years of experience promoting safety, health and sustainability in the public and private sector. Her extensive experience provided Miami-Dade County (population 2.7 million) with policies, planning and oversight for safety and health issues for the county's 28,000 employees, 25 departments and extensive public services. Ms. Mitchell holds professional certifications including Certified Safety Manager and Certified Sustainability Manager. She has graduate and undergraduate degrees in Environmental Health Science from the University of Miami and University of Georgia. Ms. Mitchell is an adjunct university professor at Florida International University and Barry University the fields of Industrial Ecology, Sustainability, Safety, and Environmental Health.

In March 2017, she ran for public office and was elected as Councilwoman for her hometown City of Miami Springs. She serves on the National Safety Council's Government and Public-Sector Leadership Board. Ms. Mitchell is also Editor of the Florida Occupational Injury and Illness Coalition Journal. In 2014 she initiated a collaboration between CDC NIOSH and Miami-Dade Public Schools to implement a Safety Skills Curriculum program within Miami-Dade Public Schools. Her new project, S-Words Initiatives, promotes the understanding and incorporation of safety, sustainability and stewardship in public and private sector organizations.



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