 Guidance Towards a Toxin-free Furniture Industry

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As a Sustainable Furnishings Council member your company has made its own commitment to sustainability, to transparency, and to continuous improvement. Our organization is committed to sustaining a healthy environment both inside and outside the home. Though members’ commitments are unique and individualized, we all share an interest in reducing the quantity of toxic and hazardous chemicals that are required to produce our products. Some of the toxic inputs we use have been required by law in certain states; some of them make our production processes more efficient; some of them enhance the performance and durability of our furnishings. But we would all prefer to achieve these end results without poisoning our environments, inside and outside the home.

SFC is committed to helping members respond to growing consumer concern. We want to help you identify what chemicals of concern you may be using or specifying, and help you know what alternatives are available. We also want to help you discuss these substances with your customers, responding to their concerns in a way that cements their loyalty to your brand.

There are over 80,000 chemicals registered for use in consumer products in the US, with as many as 2000 more being added every year. Not all of them are toxic, of course, but every year there are more that are discovered to be problematical, and many remain on the market even when they present a known threat. Consumers are becoming more aware of the threat that toxic chemicals in their indoor environments pose, especially as more and more people are sickened by something they are exposed to at home. They are doing their own research and they are bringing their questions along as they go shopping.

This document is in 2 parts – Part 1 providing help for your specification and production side, and Part 2 providing help for your marketing and communications side. Please let us know if it is useful, and what other questions and concerns you have.

PART 1 – Your Supply Chain

First, please make sure you are not using any of the most toxic chemicals. Though it is sometimes difficult to know, since there are such large quantities of chemical inputs in nearly every industrial process, there are several resources that can help you begin to clean up your supply chain immediately. Just beginning to ask questions of your suppliers will make a tremendous difference.

Stockholm Chemicals

- A “Dirty Dozen” list that was created in 2001 and has been added to since, it includes pesticides (ie: Aldrin, Chlordane, DDT, Heptachlor, Hexachlorobenzene, Dieldrin, Mirex, Toxaphene), industrial products (ie: PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls) and byproducts, or unintentionally formed chemicals (ie: polychlorinated dioxins and furans). This list comes from the POPS Treaty, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (http://chm.pops.int/TheConvention/ThePOPs/The12InitialPOPs/tabid/296/Default.aspx), which is a legally binding international agreement to protect human health and the environment from some of the most dangerous chemicals on earth. POPs are defined by their persistence in the environment, their bioaccumulation in nature and in people, and the harm they pose, often far from the source.

- The very thorough NGO Guide to Persistent Organic Pollutants, published by the International POPS Elimination Network contains thorough information on what persistent organic pollutants are, as well as on how we can begin to eliminate them. http://www.ipen.org/documents/ngo-guide-persistent-organic-pollutants
California’s Prop 65 list

- **Proposition 65** requires that the Governor publish a list of chemicals known by the state of California to be carcinogenic or to cause reproductive toxicity, and requires that all products containing certain levels of these chemicals be labeled when they are sold in that state. The list is updated at least once a year by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. [https://oehha.ca.gov/proposition-65/proposition-65-list](https://oehha.ca.gov/proposition-65/proposition-65-list). It can be downloaded in a version that has live links with more information about limits of specific chemicals.

- “Proposition 65 in Plain Language” can be found at this link: [http://oehha.ca.gov/prop65/pdf/P65Plain.pdf](http://oehha.ca.gov/prop65/pdf/P65Plain.pdf)

Cradle to Cradle list of banned chemicals

- **Cradle to Cradle**- [http://c2ccertified.org/images/uploads/C2CCertified_Banned_Lists_V3_121113.pdf](http://c2ccertified.org/images/uploads/C2CCertified_Banned_Lists_V3_121113.pdf). Notice that of these extremely harmful chemicals, the ones related to furniture production include chemicals in foam, heavy metals, and flame retardants.


The Six Classes

- Knowing that very long and complex lists of harmful chemicals are daunting for consumers, **The Green Science Policy Institute** has identified 6 classes of chemicals that are especially problematical. Many will find this a useful way to look at the longer lists, and to look at the chemical inputs in their own products. [http://www.sixclasses.org/](http://www.sixclasses.org/)

- These chemical classes contain a large proportion of the known harmful chemicals that are used in many consumer products but are not yet adequately regulated to ensure health and safety. Many are volatile or semi-volatile and migrate into air and dust, and end up in humans, animals, and the environment. (Chemicals used in foods, drugs and pesticides are not included in this list because many federal and state laws do regulate these to some extent.) The six classes containing chemicals of concern are:

  1. Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (stain and water repellants)
  2. Chlorinated Anti-microbials (triclosan and triclocarban)
  3. Flame Retardants (brominated, chlorinated, and phosphate)
  4. Some Plasticizers and Other Endocrine Disruptors (BPA, phthalates, etc.)
  5. Some Solvents (methylene chloride benzene, toluene, etc.)
  6. Some Heavy Metals (arsenic, lead, mercury, cadmium, etc.)

  **The Six Classes explained:**

  (1-3): The first three groupings of chemicals above are all organohalogenes (compounds in which carbon is bonded to bromine, chlorine, or fluorine). These chemicals are often toxic, lipophilic (fat-loving), and/or resistant to degradation, leading to their persistence and bioaccumulation in our bodies and the environment. All 22 chemicals globally banned as Persistent Organic Pollutants under the Stockholm Convention are organohalogenes. Other organohalogenes in these three classes are still used at high levels in consumer products, in spite of their similarity to chemicals that have been banned or phased out.

  (4): The fourth class comprises the commonly used endocrine disruptors, phthalates and BPA, which are ubiquitous in plastic products and our bodies. While nearly all the listed chemicals in the six classes are suspected of having endocrine disrupting qualities, these plasticizers deserve to be targeted due to their high volume of use and adverse impact on biological systems at low levels.

  (5,6): The final two classes are some heavy metals such as lead, arsenic, mercury, cadmium, and chromium and certain solvents such as methylene chloride, benzene, and toluene. Exposure to these many heavy metals and solvents has, in numerous research studies, been associated with reduced IQ, cancer, and neurological or reproductive impairments.
The Environmental Working Group
- EWG publishes useful guides for consumers, including some that cover home furnishings products, such as their Guide to Healthy Cleaning - http://www.ewg.org/guides/categories/7-Furniture

Center for Environmental Health
- For over 20 years, the Center of Environmental Health has been working to protect people and the environment from toxic chemicals by focusing on new laws and regulations. http://www.ceh.org/ They have published a list of residential furniture manufacturers that offer upholstered furniture made without added flame retardents - https://www.cenh.org/residential-furniture/

International Living Future Institute
- The Living Future Institute publishes a Red List of chemicals found in building products and often also in furnishings products - https://living-future.org/declare/declare-about/red-list/

What can you do?
- Participate in SFC's "What's it made of?" Initiative. The initiative was conceived to encourage transparency in our supply chains and to stimulate innovation towards the elimination of the harmful substances most commonly found in furnishings:
  - VOC’s, or volatile organic compounds like formaldehyde
  - Flame retardant chemicals
  - Highly fluorinated stain treatments
  - Anti-microbials
  - Polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, also known simply as "vinyl"
The "What's it made of?" Initiative consists of a simple pledge to ask, "What's it made of?" and an on-line questionnaire that helps specifiers get good answers to their questions, facilitating dialog with vendors. Pledge takers are supplied with a card that helps them remember to ASK, and to be on the look out for the "hazardous handful." Participate at this link - https://sustainablefurnishings.org/content/whats-it-made-initiative
- Use these lists and websites for reference as you ask your suppliers to eliminate toxic inputs. Knowing about these toxic chemical inputs and asking your suppliers to avoid them will make a difference. But we also suggest you consider contacting your legislators to request good strong legislation to keep your employees as well as your customers safe. As we all know, necessity is the mother of invention. In many cases, toxic chemicals will continue to be used by our suppliers and their suppliers until they become illegal. We will be more effective in sustaining healthy environments inside and outside the home when we are confident that the most egregious chemicals are not used in consumer products. You can follow SFC's work with the American Sustainable Business Council on urging legislation for safer chemicals at http://asbcouncil.org/issues/safer-chemicals#.WbgQUNPyvVo

PART 2 – Your Communications

Being proactive in talking with your suppliers about chemicals in your supply chain is a significant step to take. However, asking the questions does not guarantee quick and desired answers! So let's address how you can answer your customers' questions. As you know, more and more of them are concerned. You may already be hearing from them. As an SFC member you are at an advantage in answering these questions, even if you do not have the answers you hope to have eventually (See ANNEX section below). Here are some of the things that are important to your customers:

Transparency
As an SFC member you have made a commitment to transparency – you have committed to letting them know what you know now and what you hope to get to.

Material choices
You have made a commitment to manage your primary material or service to a more sustainable direction. You are already working on this. Let them know what you are doing, how you are educating yourself and your staff, what harmful chemicals you have managed to eliminate, what steps you are taking to go further. Inform them of other steps you are taking, like sourcing legally harvested forest products, responsibly produced plantation woods, organic fibers and recycled content.
Sometimes it takes an effort to find viable sources. Let your customers know that you are looking, and what you have been able to find so far. Consumers will appreciate your being honest. If they have gotten as far as talking with you, they understand it is a very complex issue.

**Suppliers**
You may already have written a Code of Conduct for your suppliers. If not, we recommend that you develop one now, providing written guidance to your suppliers on how you expect them to conduct business. For instance you can specify that they decrease their use/acceptance of known toxic chemicals for treatments, binders and finishes, replacing compounds that compromise indoor air quality and are harmful to human health. Your supplier code of conduct may also cover social equity issues, ensuring that the workers in the companies you do business with are protected from harmful exposure to toxic chemicals, as well as from other unfair working conditions. For your suppliers of wood products, your policy should also include specification that the wood materials be legally logged from well-managed forests. SFC provides sample policy templates.

**Mitigation**
You are probably also investigating and working to mitigate any negative environmental impacts from your operations. This is another complex issue. Managing what happens in your immediate environment is much more straight-forward than managing what happens throughout your supply chain. But you begin with a willingness to start where you are. As in many other endeavors, the first 10% is the biggest hurdle. Once you get started, you may find the questions are easier to ask and the answers easier to find.

**Honesty in Sustainability Claims**
You probably only make verifiable sustainability claims in adherence with Federal Trade Commission mandates against greenwash and in support of their Environmental Marketing Guides. That is a lot more than many other companies can say. Remember, there is no regulated definition of the term “sustainability” or “green” or “eco-friendly”. The terms are used interchangeably and define a general area that is an “umbrella” over many specifics. SFC research shows that consumers prefer the terms “environmentally safe” and “eco-friendly” to refer to the general area. Use these terms and be sure you learn the specifics that justify a particular product’s being called "eco-friendly." SFC's "Basics about Healthy Furnishings Inside and Outside is a good start - https://vimeo.com/101446559 Also use the Resources section on Awareness and Truth in Advertising at https://sustainablefurnishings.org/resource-library/search?topic=230

Be proud of your stance, and of your SFC membership. Take advantage of the resources we can offer. Invite your customers to visit http://sustainablefurnishings.org, and other websites noted here, for more information. Let us know what else we can do for you. We know your commitment is significant and we are here to support you in fulfilling it.
ANNEX: Talking Points for SFC Members

None of us can deny that there are quantities of chemicals all around us, in furnishings and in other consumer products - and many of them are known or probable toxins. Our company has joined with the Sustainable Furnishings Council to help affect positive change in the home furnishings industry. We begin with choices we make in our own operations, keeping in mind the importance of the triple bottom line profit assessment of PEOPLE-PLANET-PROFITS. We are here for the long haul, and we want to be sure we are doing our part to nurture the world we all depend upon.

Producing furnishings products is complex, with many steps and many chemical inputs at various stages. We probably cannot determine exactly what is in each piece on our floor, but we are glad to share with you what we do know, and to find out more for you.

What products in our showroom are likely to have been produced with fewer toxic inputs?

- Natural fabrics often require fewer chemical inputs in production than synthetic fabrics.
- Many natural fiber fabrics are inherently fire resistant.
- Fabrics that are made of organically grown fibers are a good choice because organic cultivation saves the use of large quantities of toxic inputs from fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, etc.
- California’s TB 117-2013 requires that upholstered furniture in sold in that state carry a label indicating whether flame retardant chemicals have been added or not.
- Latex foam is much less toxic than polyurethane foam. Latex (or other) foam wrapped in wool is flame retardant.
- Water-based finishes do not necessitate the highly toxic solvents like benzene. Even when toxic solvents have been used, the off-gassing may be complete before the product arrives at the store.
- Greenguard certification is effective assurance that the product does not off-gas problematic levels of formaldehyde or other volatile organic compounds.
- Leather production requires inputs of heavy metals like chromium salts, but leathers processed under EU law ensure that all the heavy metal inputs are kept in a closed loop system, and do not escape to pollute waterways.
- Low-impact dyes reduce the environmental impact of leather and fabric production.
- OekoTex and GOTS certifications are effective assurance that a fabric has been produced without toxic waste pollution.
- Forest Stewardship Council certification is assurance that the wood was grown and harvested without harmful chemical inputs, or other damage to the environment.
- Domestic manufacturing is significant not only because it ensures a smaller transportation footprint and so reduced CO2 emissions, but also because we have good pollution control and workers rights laws in the US, and pretty good compliance.

We are doing what we can now, and we seek continual improvement in our products, practices and operations. Specifically, we follow the guidance of SFC’s Core Values:

1. We seek legally-logged wood from vendors who have a verifiable chain of custody.
2. We reduce unsustainable raw resources and known toxic substances throughout our business.
3. We recycle in our operations, purchase recycled content and create recyclable products.
4. We reduce and reuse packing/packaging materials and reduce transportation needs.
5. We learn about Life Cycle Assessment as the best measure of a product’s environmental impact.
6. We educate our customers on sustainability and supply them with meaningful certifications.
7. We partner with our employees in making choices for sustainability, including personal and corporate energy use reductions, paying a Living Wage, and maintaining high safety standards.
8. We contribute to the economic and environmental health of our local and global communities.

Our company, like other SFC members, is committed to advancing sustainable practices in the home furnishings industry.