

Apple criticised for flame retardants in products

Greenpeace has singled out Apple for criticism over its use of hazardous substances in computers, prompting Apple to defend its record and challenge the environmental group's emphasis.

In August, Greenpeace issued a "guide to greener electronics" which ranked 14 PC and mobile producers on hazardous substances and equipment recycling. Apple came eleventh (see table), well behind rivals such as Dell, HP and Sony.

GREENPEACE RANKING OF MOBILE AND PC PRODUCERS ON HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES AND EQUIPMENT RECYCLING	
1 Nokia, Dell (equal first)	9 Toshiba
3 HP	10 Fujitsu Siemens
4 Sony Ericsson	11 Apple
5 Samsung	12 Acer
6 Sony	13 Motorola
7 LG Electronics	14 Lenovo
8 Panasonic	

The following month Greenpeace claimed the results of tests on five laptop brands revealed those produced by Apple and HP showed the "worst contamination levels". The announcements marked the latest stage in Greenpeace's two-year campaign to persuade consumer product producers to phase out hazardous substances, such as brominated flame retardants (BFRs) and PVC.

In doing so, it hopes to have the substitution principle - requiring hazardous substances to be replaced by less hazardous ones - included in the REACH regime on the regulation of chemicals. The proposed REACH Regulation is due to receive its second reading in the European Parliament later this year.

Greenpeace decided to home in on Apple because of the company's reputation for producing innovative, trend-setting consumer products such as the iPod. "It is disappointing to see Apple ranking so low... They are meant to be world leaders in design and marketing, they should also be world leaders in environmental innovation," said toxic substances campaigner Iza Kruszewska.

Earlier in the campaign, Greenpeace singled out companies for praise rather than criticism. But it may have decided to abandon this strategy after applauding Motorola (ENDS Report 369, pp 21-22), only to accuse it of "backtracking" on commitments

to phase out PVC and BFRsS.

The laptop tests were conducted on products bought in Europe in March. The group said the Apple laptop contained the highest level of the flame retardant tetrabromobisphenol A (TBBA). The substance, widely used in printed circuit boards, was not one of the BFRs banned in July 2006 by the EU Directive on the restriction of hazardous substances (RoHS) in electronic equipment.

Apple says it is committed to replacing TBBA as part of a wider goal to introduce halogen-free circuit boards, but it has not set a deadline. In contrast Dell has promised to eliminate all uses of brominated flame retardants by 2009.

Similarly, Greenpeace's greener electronics guide gave Apple poor marks for failing to set a date to eliminate BFRs and PVC. The group also complains that Apple does not have any PVC-free or BFR-free product systems and only lists some PVC-free "peripherals", such as adapters and battery packs, on its website.

Apple declined ENDS' request to speak to its environmental management team. Instead a statement said the company has "led the industry in restricting and banning substances such as mercury, cadmium and hexavalent chromium, as well as many BFRs".

It also said the company has phased out cathode ray tube monitors, noting these contained lead. But other more important issues have driven the industry-wide switch to flat-screens.

Apple also claimed credit for its desktop PCs, notebooks and displays scoring "best in class" under the US Environmental Protection Agency's new electronic product environmental assessment tool (EPEAT).

EPEAT requires products to meet a set of environmental criteria and a proportion of additional, optional criteria covering issues such as hazardous substances, use of recycled and bio-based plastics, design for recovery and energy efficiency. Products can be awarded a bronze, silver or gold ranking according to the proportion of the optional criteria they meet in addition to the compulsory criteria.

The compulsory criteria on hazardous substances require compliance with the RoHS Directive, reporting on mercury used in light sources and elimination of intentionally added short-chain chlorinated paraffins in certain applications. But they do not require elimination of all BFRs or PVC.

No desktops meet the gold standard. Of the 38 products meeting the silver standard, Dell produces 16, Lenovo 11, HP ten and Apple just one.

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