

Questions and Answers on the revised Ecolabel scheme

1. What is the Ecolabel scheme?

The European Ecolabel scheme is a voluntary scheme, established in 1992, to encourage businesses to market products and services that are kinder to the environment. Products and services awarded the Ecolabel carry the logo shown below, thus allowing consumers - including public and private purchasers - to identify them easily.

2. How does the scheme work?

To obtain the Ecolabel, products and services must meet stringent environmental criteria which are agreed at European level following wide consultation with experts from industry, environmental and consumer organisations and trade unions.

The stringency of the criteria means that the scheme is selective: in any product group, only those products and services with the lowest environmental impact over their life span can qualify for the eco-label. The criteria used differ from one product group to another but typically relate to environmental impacts such as use of energy and toxic substances, emissions to water, air and soil during production, and recyclability of the product at the end of its life.

Once the criteria have been set for a particular product or service, producers/service providers which consider that their product complies with the criteria can apply for the Ecolabel to a designated independent national authority in a Member State. The authority will award the label only if it is satisfied after verification that the product or service meets the high environmental standards set.

The stringent criteria and the fact that the Ecolabel is awarded by independent authorities with no vested interest gives the EU scheme its credibility and distinguishes the Ecolabel from self-claims made by companies.

Once awarded, the Ecolabel is valid across the 27 EU Member States as well as in Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. It thus gives businesses the opportunity to use one label for all their pan-European, and even global, marketing.

3. Which products and services are covered by the Ecolabel?

There are currently 26 product groups covered by the EU Ecolabel, from soaps and shampoos, tissue paper, paints and varnishes, through to hotels and campsites. The Ecolabel does not apply to food products, which are covered by other labelling schemes and rules.

One of the aims of the revision of the scheme announced today is to increase the number of product groups to 40-50 by 2015 so that there will be a much wider range of Ecolabelled products and services for consumers to choose from.

A list of companies selling eco-labelled products and services can be found on the EU Ecolabel website at <http://www.eco-label.com>.

4. Why should I buy Ecolabelled products?

Today's patterns of consumption and production are putting heavy pressure on the world's natural resources and also have considerable other negative impacts on the environment, for example in the form of waste, air and water pollutants and greenhouse gases. To protect the environment for ourselves and our children and grandchildren, we all have an interest in minimising the environmental impacts of our own consumption. Buying eco-labelled products and services instead of alternatives that are less kind to the environment helps to achieve this.

The good news is that eco-labelled products are not necessarily more expensive. Products that use fewer chemicals, for instance, can often be cheaper.

5. What are the benefits for a business of obtaining an Ecolabel for its products or services?

Obtaining the Eco-label gives businesses a market advantage, allowing them to promote their products and services with an increasingly well known logo that consumers trust and that public purchasers and retailers look for.

6. What is the difference between the EU Eco-label and national or regional Ecolabel schemes?

The EU Eco-label is the only pan-European eco-label scheme. However other national or regional eco-labels are also founded on the same principles of third-party credibility and environmental excellence. What should be avoided are unsubstantiated, self-made green claims on products.

7. Why is the scheme being revised?

While the scheme has been growing well over recent years, it is clear that more can be done to streamline its procedures.

8. What will change with the revision of the Eco-label?

The proposed new Ecolabel Regulation will operate more efficiently by reducing bureaucracy that has slowed the system down. There will also be a stronger focus on products and services that have the most significant environmental impacts and the highest potential for improvement.

The revised scheme will reduce the administrative process for developing criteria, allowing the number of product groups covered by the label to grow considerably, and will speed up the procedure for applicants to begin using the label. Criteria will be simplified while maintaining a high level of ambition, and documentation on criteria will be easier to use and will provide guidance for public purchasing authorities. The procedure for assessing the compliance of products and services applying for the eco-label will also be simplified.

A small application charge will replace the annual fee paid by companies for the right to use the Eco-label logo.

9. How does the Eco-label relate to the rest of the Action Plan on Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy?

As part of the Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan, the new Regulation will be better linked with other environmental policies, such as those concerning Eco-design and Green Public Purchasing.

For example, where Eco-design implementing measures are set according to the Energy-using Products Directive, eco-label criteria will be agreed at the same time. This will lead to harmonised standards and test methods for the different instruments, making it easier for companies to use them. Also, documents setting out eco-label criteria will directly offer advice to public purchasers on how to 'buy green.'

More information on the European Ecolabel scheme can be found at the following websites:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/index_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/revision_en.htm