

Applying the Principles and Practice of LCA to Green Procurement Initiatives

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Governments' interest in promoting the purchasing of environmentally superior products is long established. The US Federal Comprehensive Procurement Guidelines and the Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) program are prominent examples. Many states have followed suit, with examples of so-called green procurement programs proposed or active in California (the State Agency Buy Recycled Campaign), New York, Texas, and other states.

These measures have varying degrees of influence on the purchasing practices of their subject agencies, and often unknown or undocumented environmental impacts. In concept, green procurement measures have the potential to use the government's considerable purchasing power to favorably influence the environmental performance of products offered to both public and private sector markets. When poorly applied, however, they can direct government spending towards products with questionable environmental benefits, while limiting market access for competing products that present viable commercial and environmental solutions.

The process of establishing procurement preferences has many parallels with LCA practice, and indeed could benefit from applying an LCA-like methodology. The ISO14040 Standards for LCA outline a rigorous process for making comparative assessments, and procurement preferences are themselves guidelines for making comparative assessments. An example of the utility and relevance of the LCA process to the establishment of procurement preferences is goal setting. A procurement preference with a goal of waste minimization can operate with different criteria—and will result in different outcomes—than one with a goal of reducing global warming potential. When goals are clearly articulated, the development of procurement criteria is focused on the desired outcome, and innovative solutions by affected parties are enabled.

This paper will examine the applicability of the principles of LCA practice to the development of effective procurement criteria. The author will draw on Hewlett-Packard's global experience in procurement preference development, presenting case studies illustrating both effective and ineffective practices.