

HP Delays Toxic Phase-Out

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OAKLAND, Calif. -- HP has delayed a planned phase-out of toxic chemicals from its computer products until 2011, citing a lack of suitable alternatives.

Polyvinyl chloride (PVC), brominated flame retardants (BFRs) and other materials have long been used in the high-tech industry, but pressure to phase out these chemicals has grown in lockstep with a rising tide of stakeholder activism and consumer awareness. Environmental groups such as [As You Sow](#) and Greenpeace, for example, have publicly called on electronics companies to remove toxics from their products and responsibly dispose of them.

Earlier this month, Greenpeace praised Apple in its most recent Guide to Greener Electronics as an example of how a company can feasibly remove BFR and PVC from its products, following ongoing protests from the environmental group. On Tuesday, HP found itself in the group's cross hairs when Greenpeace scaled HP's headquarters and painted "Hazardous Products" on the roof in nontoxic children's finger paint.

In response to the protest, HP acknowledged it still uses BFRs in printed-circuit boards because suitable alternatives are not yet available.



In an email message, the company noted its long-term commitment to environmental

sustainability, which focuses on three aspects: minimizing their impact; helping customers to improve their environmental performance; and driving towards a sustainable, low-carbon economy.

"This commitment includes reducing the use of BFR/PVC in our products until these materials are eliminated entirely. HP has introduced several new computing products this year that use less BFR/PVC than previous generations," HP said in a statement.

The company characterized the Greenpeace demonstration as "unconstructive," saying it did nothing "to advance the goals that all who care about the environment share." HP reiterated its support of industry efforts to eliminate BFR and PVC because of potential e-waste issues.

Other companies who scored poorly on Greenpeace's Guide to Greener Electronics guide included Lenovo and Dell, two companies also grappling with finding environmentally friendly alternatives to toxic electronics chemicals.

"We continually review our environmental programs and we make the necessary revisions to programs and policies based on the most currently available information including environmental, customer and business requirements," Lenovo's Kristy Fair told GreenBiz.com in an email message. "We believe more time is needed to work with our suppliers to ensure the availability of environmental preferable substitutes for materials of concern."

Dell noted that it understands and shares Greenpeace's concerns about making products with low environmental impact.

"We remain very committed to proactively eliminating environmentally sensitive substances from our products, and we're working closely with our suppliers to accomplish this," Dell's Michelle Mosmeyer said in an emailed statement. "This commitment is genuine, and we already deliver some BFR/PVC-reduced products today. However, as there are no viable alternatives to many of the components used in our products which include these chemicals, we've adjusted our timetable for eliminating them accordingly."

An Apple representative was not immediately available to comment on the complex process of finding a substitute for these chemicals in their supply chain. A statement on its website called the presence of arsenic, BFRs, mercury, phthalates, and PVC in products the "greatest challenge facing our industry today."

"In keeping with our philosophy over the last decade, Apple is not waiting for legislation to ban these substances," Apple said. "Not only are we targeting BFRs and PVC, but we are also eliminating all forms of bromine and chlorine wherever technically possible. We are on track to achieve this goal years ahead of anyone else in the industry."

Publicly chastening companies has in the past been effective in calling attention to issues such as toxic chemical use, Conrad MacKerron, director of the corporate social responsibility program at [As You Sow](#), said in a telephone interview.

"But in the long run, in terms of the actual change, it depends on whether they are making good faith efforts to change things," he said, adding there could be credible reasons for why they are unable to adapt quickly, such as lack of suitable alternatives.

Regarding efforts to recycle electronic waste, MacKerron said there are concerns on both sides of the lifecycle -- from production to deconstruction and disposal -- and it will take a fair amount of time to clean up an entire sector of business.

"The IT industry has been more responsive to stakeholder concerns in a similar amount of time, compared to when we were pressing apparel companies for using sweatshop labor a decade ago," he said.

Indeed, the sector has made efforts to clean up their businesses. For example, Dell sells laptops with mercury-free LED backlighting and offers free computer recycling worldwide. Lenovo sells a PC monitor that is free of arsenic and mercury, as well as monitors that contain 25 percent post-consumer content recycled plastics.

In addition, HP plans to release a BFR/PVC free notebook in September, and says that by fall of 2010, all "new commercial products" released will also be free of these chemicals. Between 1987 and 2007, HP recycled one billion pounds of electronic products.

At this point in time, the situation has presented a market opportunity for Apple to promote its PVC and BFR-free products over its competitors' wares. Perhaps competition could be just as powerful of a motivator as public shame to push its rivals to find solutions fast.

photo courtesy Kim White, Greenpeace