

ADPSR National Forum
PO Box 11754 Berkeley, CA
94712
415-974-1306
www.adpsr.org

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212-539-7650
www.adpsr-ny.org

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847-328-9390
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USGBC TSAC PVC Task Group
tsac@committees.usgbc.org

February 9, 2005

Dear TSAC Members,

ADPSR strongly supports USGBC and its environmental goals, but we are strongly disappointed with your draft report on the environmental impacts of vinyl. At a time when the rapid growth of LEED-registered buildings and LEED-accredited professionals (including many ADPSR members) indicates the widespread progress of environmental values, all of us in the green building field should be moving forward. It is our understanding that LEED was developed to recognize and reward the behavior of green building leaders—the top 10-25% of the construction market—and hence not to be a lowest-common-denominator rating system. In this context, TSAC's failure to recognize the environmental damage that vinyl continues to produce places the LEED system out of step with its intended goals and muddies the waters of environmental protection for building industry members who look to USGBC for leadership and clarity. While it may be difficult to implement a much-needed vinyl avoidance credit for the next draft of LEED, given our disappointment with the TSAC report we urge USGBC to discard this report and leave the matter open until a more appropriate study can be conducted.

We recognize that TSAC put a lot of effort into examining the vinyl debate, and attempted to review existing scientific reports impartially. We recognize the important credentials of the Vinyl Task Group members and would ordinarily trust their judgement. However, TSAC's report suffers from questionable methodology, incorporate of poor source material, and too narrow scope. This is why professionals who we deeply respect, such as chemist Michael Braungart, have publicly said that the quality of your work is poor. Important environmental health professionals were not consulted, and most of literature involved in the review was from industry sources. In ADPSR's opinion, industry studies of the health effects of their own products can not be significantly trusted. The litany of industries that have engaged in deceptive research, outright fraud, and public attempts to mislead the public is large, from heavily-promoted bogus studies by climate change skeptics to the tobacco industry.

We recently learned that WR Grace was finally indicted for poisoning Libby, MT mine workers and area residents with asbestos, long after the mine ceased operation. For how many years did Grace maintain there was no health impact of asbestos? How long did the building industry use their products, until finally the federal government—and not our industry itself—forced a halt to its production. Those lost years were years without treatment for thousands with asbestosis. Is this the legacy USGBC wants to rewrite with vinyl? If USGBC intends to be ahead of government regulation of toxics, it can hardly approve a report that validates the vinyl industry's own research, which distorts the impacts of their products and by-products.

Methodologically, TSAC's study was flawed by an over-reliance on life-cycle analysis and risk-assessment. Both techniques are rooted in quantification of incommensurable environmental health impacts, which is an inherently questionable practice that can only be applied honestly in limited cases. The clear gaps in necessary information cited by TSAC—to their credit—only make the use of these techniques less appropriate. Risk assessment in particular attempt to quantify the value of shorter human life spans, and hence to define an acceptable quantity of toxic releases. This is not only in violation of the precautionary principle—widely cited in global environmental science—but is ethically objectionable. The building industry is not a set of insurance actuaries, nor should we act like one. Instead of determining how much injury and death due to vinyl, chlorine, and dioxin is acceptable, USGBC should be taking the position that the production and dissemination of these chemicals is wrong and that safe alternatives need strong support and rapid acceptance.



It has recently come to our attention that the Green Building Council of Australia has decided to offer a vinyl-avoidance credit in its counterpart to LEED, "Green Star." They took the step in order to stay current with European precedents. For them, the environmental impacts of PVC are clear and it is a commonsense measure to phase out its use. The forthcoming EU "REACH" chemical proposals will make pvc far less commonly used throughout Europe as well. The difference between these foreign approaches and the current state of PVC use in the United States—supported by TSAC's status quo report—is not a greater tolerance for the health impacts of toxic chemicals by Americans, nor is there much difference in the pvc-containing products in different parts of the world. The difference between the U.S. and our fellow industrialized countries is the political strength of the chemical industry, and industry in general. It's not hard to find examples of American industry using its political muscle to force the public to bear the costs of their profits, from the lax regulation of toxic chemicals, to the hand-over of public resources, to resisting obvious but not cost-free homeland security measures at chemical plants.

Well, this is the country we find ourselves in, but we don't have to accept it. As we mentioned above, ADPSR has been very supportive of USGBC's attempt to transform the building industry to make it less harmful to the environment and the public. It seems, in fact, that USGBC was founded as a challenge to business as usual. ADPSR shares goals with USGBC such as taking responsibility for the actions of our industry and demonstrating alternatives to conventional practice that are not only benign, but restorative. The case of the vinyl industry as a bad actor within the building industry could hardly be clearer. It has been time all along for USGBC to take responsibility for toxins in building materials—to your credit, you do this in many areas-- and to challenge the conventional acceptance of pvc. Accepting TSAC's report, stating that vinyl is not problematic, is not a step in the right direction. We urge you to drop the report and, when you've had a chance to catch your breath, to try again with a broader context for evaluating vinyl's impact, including international opinion and excluding dubious industry-sponsored research.

In closing, thank you for all of USGBC's work on behalf of our shared environment and industry.

Sincerely yours,

National Board of Directors
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ADPSR is a national non-profit organization founded in 1983 that works for disarmament, protection of the natural and built environment, and socially responsible development.