

The Sustainable Fabric Alliance (SFA) – Sourcing Upholstery to Drapery

Environmental and Human Health Impact: Reduce global and Kaiser Permanente community exposure to many chemicals of concern, including vinyl, heavy metals, and volatile organic compounds.

Business Impact: Approximate annual cost savings generated by the Sustainable Fabric Alliance is \$1 million or 30 percent.

Challenge

Fabric. We sit on it every day, it decorates our rooms, and provides us with privacy, yet we do not often think about its material content. In order to meet the durability, infection control, and fire safety requirements of the health care environment, the fabric industry has relied increasingly on petrochemical-based materials and chemical coatings and finishes. Unfortunately, scientific studies have linked the release of these chemicals, during manufacturing and use, to a number of adverse health effects including cancer, thyroid disease, and developmental defects. As the annual purchaser of over seven percent of the industry's fabric, Kaiser Permanente recognized an opportunity to move the market toward more sustainable processes and outcomes.

Aim/Goal

To utilize the Kaiser Permanente Environmentally Preferred Purchasing Policy (EPP policy) to develop tiered sustainability criteria for fabric, and then to source as many fabrics as possible that meet the most rigorous criteria.

Team

Sustainable Fabric Alliance (Alliance)– Comprised of many National Facilities Services (NFS) representatives, National Environmental Health and Safety, and external and internal content experts James Pak, Sourcing Manager, Procurement & Supply

Actions Taken

- ✓ In mid-2006, the Alliance was convened to update the national standards for fabrics by greatly advancing the environmental performance criteria of the products.
- ✓ The Alliance educated itself on the myriad environmental impacts related to fabrics, and developed subsequent standards or criteria for fabric entering Kaiser Permanente facilities.
- ✓ Suppliers were requested to complete a rigorous product disclosure form that was based on the EPP policy and additional sustainability considerations.

- ✓ Fabric samples were tested for various chemicals and off-gassing.
- ✓ Supplier's fabrics were then separated into three predetermined environmental performance categories: Category I avoids all chemicals of concern in the EPP policy and beyond, Category II avoids at least three chemicals of concern in the policy, and Category III does not meet any of the policy requirements.

Results

- The Alliance eliminated one incumbent supplier, reducing our national suppliers to three, while reducing annual fabric spend and avoiding most Category III fabrics.
- The Alliance chose Category I fabrics whenever possible. The most prevalent fabrics selected fall into Category II.
- Contractual arrangement with suppliers that all Category III fabrics will be phased out and all Category II fabrics must meet Category I specifications within two years.

Lessons Learned

- ✓ There is always more to do. While many synthetic chemicals commonly found in fabrics were avoided due to the Alliance's work, there are still more to address. Therefore, the approach to chemical phase-out must be methodical and long-term.
- ✓ The California Technical Bulletin 133 sets fire safety and resistance standards for furniture sold in California, which leads to the heavy use of harmful flame retardants in furniture foams and barriers. The Alliance recognizes that it will need to address these chemicals as well, to advance a sustainable furniture agenda.

Next Steps

- ✓ Continue to look for less toxic fabric treatments that meet the moisture repellent and stain-resistant requirements.
- ✓ Research feasibility of using *inherently* flame resistant or retardant foams and barriers in furnishings.



*For a more detailed description of the Sustainable Fabric Alliance, reference: KP Fabric White Paper