



BY SCOTT BURT

# 2010 GreenVo

## THE GREEN ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

When I close my eyes, I see Green. Not money, or the color, but eco-friendly cans of paint that are pricey. At times it can be a bit numbing. All the manufacturers have them—and marketing budgets that won't let us, or anyone, forget. Just like the proverbial elephant in the room, Green paints are impossible to ignore.

I'm pretty sure that the marketing execs at the major manufacturers' headquarters didn't just decide to throw some lines out there that would appeal to tree huggers. Tree huggers may or may not be the most lucrative market segment to design products around. My research has led me to the conclusion that new product development and launches don't happen on a shoestring or a whim.

What we can consider to be a generally accepted truth is the reality that government regulation of manufacturers has been the driving force behind the wave of Green products hitting the paint store shelves in recent years. Or perhaps we could even say that fear of government regulation has driven it. It's doubtful that anyone—manufacturers, dealers or painters—would deny the source of the movement. In other words, it's not the bomb itself, but rather the fear of the bomb that makes the bomb such an effective weapon. Having established, in very general terms, why this whole thing started, it's interesting to consider some of the effects that it has on the professional painting contractor.

### They Aren't Good

That's right. Not good. In many cases, they're really, really good. Any day of the week, I will take a fleet of \$56 cans of ultra-premium, low-VOC, or \$45 zero-VOC, and go out into the field and paint deep base accent walls all over someone's house. That's just good clean fun these days. They're amazing. But you know, in their price ranges, they ought to be. They cut, they roll, they level, they cover, they dry, they don't smell bad, they scrub, they touch up, they don't flash and they clean up well.

I remember 10 years ago using some of the early incarnations of eco paints. The experience was so traumatic—and unprofitable—that it's more than a small wonder that

I was ever open to trying them again. For the record, I wasn't hypnotized or coerced on re-entry into the world of low VOC about three years ago. I simply tried a new product and liked it. *A lot.*

### Old Days and New Days

Got to be honest here, I do not miss being bound to glycol tints day in and day out. There are newer, more appropriate colorant systems out there that exceed the old technology in every measurable category of paint application performance (as above: cut, roll, level, cover, dry, don't smell, scrub, touch up, don't flash, clean up) and are able to do so in a waterborne, VOC-free fashion. This is important because we have long-term relationships with our paint suppliers and the guys working in the paint stores who mix our paints for us. Some of the relationships are over 12 years old. Some of the guys mixing our paints have been doing it in those same stores for much longer.

We also have painters on our crew who've been with us for more than 10 years. We have customer relationships that exceed 15 years. I've been playing with paint for more than 25 years, at last count. What all of us have in common is occupational and/or home-based exposure to paint-related chemicals. Why on earth wouldn't we support a healthier standard for paint products? It doesn't have to be more profitable to us, although it can be. It doesn't have to outperform the paints we all remember from the '70s that damaged the old guy on the crew's nervous system to the extent that he can't cut a straight line anymore (but man is he a hoot!).

Don't get me wrong. I remember what the old primers used to be like. The ones from 20 years ago that if you got it on your hands, good luck cleaning up, your skin would come off before that stuff would. And the old penetrating deck oils, even filtered through a respirator, were like the first cigarette you ever smoked that left you chain smoking and chasing the dragon until one day you woke up and realized it probably wasn't a good thing to do to yourself. I remember that particular intoxication that so many of the old products brought on; the type that would get



Folks around the industry share opinions and facts about where Green is going and why you should be going along.

you through the day that much faster and happier. I probably wouldn't have ever had the patience to learn how to properly spread paint if it hadn't been for those old products.

### Who Requests This Stuff?

On the residential side, I am getting the feeling that most homeowners couldn't possibly care much less whether or not we use a low- or no-VOC paint inside their houses. Human beings are generally not that hyper-vigilant about the quality of the air they breathe, or the odors that may or may not be present in their homes, especially if the ability to eliminate these matters is going to have an adverse effect on their finances... with ONE notable exception.

There may be no more paranoid, ultra-sensitive variety of human beings on the planet who are more concerned with the environment in their homes than the pregnant or recently pregnant home-owning couple. I must confess that when my own wife became pregnant, I scurried through our 100-year-old home frantically replacing or encapsulating every old piece of trim in the house with fresh coats of safer stuff for infant tactile exploration. Allow me to be very clear in making this point. Pregnant couples or parents of young children are extremely interested in Green paints and are usually willing to spend a few extra dollars to create a safer home environment for their families.

There are three other influences on our ability to spec our projects for low- and no-VOC paints—architects,



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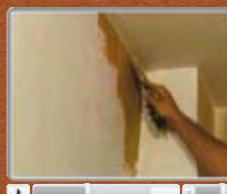
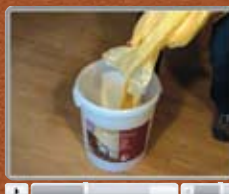
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Scott Burt painted this Green kitchen yellow.

builders and designers. In recent years, more and more architects are embracing the concept of designing structures to be candidates for LEED certification. Whether we like the LEED concept or not, it definitely kicks the door wide open for VOC-compliant paint products. From the architect, the specs for Green paint flow right down the supply chain through the builder, designer and

painter, and Green products land square in homeowners' laps. Fortunately for the paint contractor, the current generation of Green paints are very high quality products that perform to a legitimately high professional standard. They're available in all colors and sheens, and they're pretty easy to get hooked on. The day will soon be here when Green paints are no longer considered an exceptional paint spec; they'll become the norm. *Scott Burt is president of Topcoat Finishes in Jericho, VT, and has contributed several columns to The Paint Dealer magazine as well. Go to [topcoatfinishes.com](http://topcoatfinishes.com)*



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BY TOM RIOUX

## WHAT'S IN THIS STUFF ANYWAY?

As a painter, I never thought I was using poison; but after 20 years of painting I nearly died from chemicals in paints. Healthy one day, crippled the next. I had no idea why I was so ill. For five years, three on chemo, I would shrug off suggestions from family and friends. They'd insinuate that the paint I'd been using may have made me sick. I couldn't see it. *Wouldn't* see it. Until eventually it became very clear that when I went near paint my immune system would freak. Realizing that the stuff I earn my living from could be toxic wasn't easy to accept. But once I did it set me to seriously ask, "What's in this stuff anyway?"

Years ago the only choice for finishing a home was an oil-based finish. Tough as sheet metal, these naturally derived resins defied Mother Nature but were very slow to dry. To fix this, they quickly became saturated with petrochemical solvents as the industrial age detonated. Solvents like benzene were added to

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Then came water-based paints. These didn't hold up as well as oils and never seemed to clean up off the brush. Eventually these water-based paints got better but at the cost of toxicity. The most common offender is probably ethylene glycol. This sweet, water-based chemical is a very dangerous solvent that helps water-based paint coalesce, accept pigment, hide well, flow and even keeps it from freezing if enough is added. All great things in a paint if it wasn't straight up poison. Spray a 2,000-square-foot house with a paint that has this stuff in it and it should be boarded up immediately.

California did a study that showed the solvents were still coming off paint two years later! Not only should that house be boarded up, it should be quarantined for at least two years. And for goodness sake keep kids out!

Ethylene glycol is a VOC. The EPA's have educated the public with its low-VOC policies. Unfortunately, people have gotten the impression that low- or zero-VOC paint is safe. The impression has been given that because something is low VOC it doesn't contain toxins. This is a fallacy. Acetone is a good example. This nasty solvent will blow your head off when you open a wood finish that contains it. Acetone is VOC exempt. It's not considered a VOC! And even worse are the additives. Dozens of high-powered additives go into paint. These don't have to be listed if they're under 2%. It's no mistake that 1.96% seems to be exactly the right loading for most additives.

## Chemistry? You'll Need It!

The point here is that paint is complex chemistry. So are human beings. So is the planet! When we mess with this stuff, we need to really be careful or things can get out of control. We see this now in the health of painters all over the world. But it's more than just our trade; it's homes and families.

It's people raising children, working through life, cooking pasta, trusting that their beautiful new paint jobs aren't secretly releasing a formaldehyde-creating mildewcide that no one knew about. And heaven forbid someone gets asthma from it! And what happens when the brushes are cleaned in the sink or dumped in the ground out by the hose? Does that same biocide have a horrible aquatic fate that disrupts the food chain at the most basic level? There are billions of tons of paint dumped out every year.

It's always struck me that my customers seemed willing to sacrifice my health and my crew's health for a few more years of durability from their paint. I'd say "Here, this is a good paint and it's not as toxic." They'd say, "Oh that's nice. Thanks, but I'd rather you use the 'good stuff' (poison) so it looks good longer," or something along those lines. I always chose the toughest and consequentially the most toxic products. That was my fault. But it also gave birth to Earthpaint; a company that was started to prove that great paint can be made without the poisons; that the toughest paint doesn't have to be toxic. There are no perfect solutions that work for everyone but we can make things as safe as possible. Our wood finishes are 100% natural. They can biodegrade in a compost pile and be used to grow vegetables. The house paint is the safest, toughest paint I know of. For every ingredient I ask, "Where is it from? How is it made? Is it safe? What will happen to it in a landfill?" If it passes this test it gets formulated and sent to my chemist who perfects it.

*Tom Rioux is president/founder of Earthpaint Inc., a company specializing in high-quality, non-toxic, sustainable paints. Earthpaint's mission is "Great Paint without the Poisons!" Go to [earthpaint.net](http://earthpaint.net)*





BY CHRISTINE CHASE,  
GREEN SEAL

## DEMYSTIFYING GREEN

The desire for Green products and services has been growing, but what does being Green really mean? How can you differentiate products that are truly better for the environment from those that are guilty of Greenwashing? Finally, how do you communicate to your customers that a product is truly environmentally responsible?

If a customer is asking for Green paints, what are they mainly concerned with? One of the major

human health and environmental concerns in regards to paint are volatile organic compounds. VOCs can present a number of environmental impacts on air quality—such as the production of smog—and therefore are regulated. As a contractor, it would be helpful to know what products have low VOCs—and what is considered low VOC—when you have customers looking for a Greener product due to air quality concerns or sustainability.

Since most VOCs in colorants are not regulated, it's important to inform the customer that the addition of universal colorants may add VOCs to the product. Some low-VOC and zero-VOC paints are tinted with low-VOC colorants, and knowing what products have this combination can be helpful information for your customers who want a Greener product.

Some customers may ask for a Material Safety Data Sheet to get more information about a product. Those customers are defining Green products not just through VOCs, but also through chemical composition. They're asking:

- Are there carcinogens, reproductive toxins or hazardous air pollutants in the paint they're considering?
- What's off-gassing when they apply the product?



### Join the (Third) Party!

Your customers will want to make sure that a product is not only Green, but that it works! From a lifecycle standpoint, if a low-VOC product is not durable and only lasts a few years before you have to repaint, are you truly being environmentally preferable? Green Seal, and other multi-attribute eco-labels that follow international guidelines, include minimal performance requirements in their standards. Green Seal believes that, in order for a product to be truly environmentally preferable, it should work as well as or better than a conventional product.

Third-party certification is defined as the objective, thorough review process that ensures the claims that a company is making are true. But how do you trust the third party? Several years ago, *Consumer Reports* came out with a guide of "what makes a good eco-label" and listed criteria for judging a third party's certification: it should be consistent and clear, transparent, independent (free of conflict of interest), and provide opportunities for public comment during the development of the certification standard.

Third-party certification that meets those requirements provides an invaluable tool to customers who're asking for validation of a truly environmentally responsible product that takes into account the lifecycle impacts. Examples of third-party certification that meet these requirements include Green Seal in the United States and EcoLogo in Canada. Another third-party certification program, Greenguard, focuses on emission-based testing. A little research on any new seal or mark on a product will go a long way in answering many of your customers' questions.

*Christine Chase is the certification manager at Green Seal where she oversees the certification program. Her previous projects have included project coordinator on the GS-11 Paint and Coatings Standard Revision. Go to [greenseal.org](http://greenseal.org) [TPC](http://www.tpc.com)*

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