

SUSTAINABILITY GLOSSARY

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TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

An expanded baseline for measuring performance, adding social and environmental dimensions to the traditional monetary benchmark. Triple bottom line, or TBL, is often expressed through examples: People Planet, Profit; or Ecology, Economy, Equality.

esd.rgs.org

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Any change to the environment, good or bad, that wholly or partially results from industrial /manufacturing activities, products, services, land usage, or natural events. Energy consumption, greenhouse gas (CO2-eq) production, toxicity and natural resources depletion are some of the key environmental impact areas.

iowadnr.com

ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

The process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed.

ser.org

DESIGN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT (DfE)

A product label issued by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that allows consumers to quickly identify and choose products that can help protect the environment and are safer for families. The DfE scientific review team screens each ingredient for potential human health and environmental effects based on currently available information, EPA predictive models, and expert judgement.

epa.gov

GREENWASHING

The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.

sinsofgreenwashing.org

SUSTAINABILITY

Meeting the economic, ecological and social needs of the day without impairing the chances of development of future generations.

More terms at LivingPrinciples.org

SUSTAINABILITY GLOSSARY

Keep your sustainability terminology straight by perusing these glossary cards.

Learn more at LivingPrinciples.org.

DOWNCYCLING

The practice of recycling a material in such a way that much of its inherent value is lost. For example, recycling plastic into park benches or office paper eventually becoming pulp to mold an egg carton.

mbdc.com/c2c_gkc.htm

INDUSTRIAL COMPOSTING

Similar to backyard composting but requiring industrial-scale processes such as higher heats and more controlled conditions, which allow for a greater variety of inputs, including: meat, bones, fats, bioplastics, and food service paper-products.

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CLOSED-LOOP RECYCLING

The practice of collecting used materials from customers for remanufacture by the same firm or industry group. Example: Interface Carpet's Flor product line, or Patagonia's Common Threads Garment Recycling.

BACKYARD COMPOSTING

The controlled decomposition of organic food waste and yard trimmings in urban, suburban, and rural backyards which produces a nutrient-rich top soil. Composting is considered waste source reduction, not recycling, because the composted materials never enter the municipal waste stream.

epa.gov/ocepatерms

BIODEGRADABLE

Characteristic of a material that can be broken down into simpler substances (elements and compounds) by bacteria and fungi, changing the chemical makeup and physical appearance of materials.

epa.gov/ocepatерms

RENEWABLE RESOURCES

A resource that can be replenished at a rate equal to or greater than its rate of depletion. Examples of renewable resources include trees, crops, and vegetable-based products.

interfaceglobal.com

MOBIUS LOOP A.K.A. CHASING ARROWS

The common nickname for the recycling symbol. The three arrows represent the main steps in the process:

- 1) the collection and separation of recyclable materials;
- 2) the manufacturing of these materials into new products;
- 3) the purchase and use of these recycled products.

[More terms at LivingPrinciples.org](http://LivingPrinciples.org)

CARBON OFFSETTING

Financial investments made to 'offset' the carbon emissions of a product or process. These include the investment in technologies or practices that reduce carbon in another industry, or the gathering and sequestering of carbon through nature, such as forest restoration, tree conservation, and renewable energy projects (solar and wind farms).

dollco.com

CARBON FOOTPRINT

The total amount of greenhouse gases emitted directly or indirectly through an activity or from a product, company or person, typically expressed in equivalent tons of either carbon or carbon dioxide. Methods of calculation have yet to be standardized.

interfaceglobal.com

RENEWABLE ENERGY

Energy obtained from sources that are inexhaustible, unlike fossil fuels which are finite. Renewable energy sources include: biomass, geothermal, wind, photovoltaic and solar thermal energy.

epa.gov/ocepatерms



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ECO-EFFICIENCY

An effort to achieve the best possible efficiency throughout the creation, use, and disposal of a product or service. Eco-Efficiency simply means ‘doing more with less’. It is not a synonym for sustainability, as it considers only the environmental and economic aspects of the product without regard for the social implications.

sustainabilitydictionary.com

BIODIVERSITY

The range of living organisms supported by a particular ecosystem. Biodiversity includes genetic variation within species, the variety of species in an area, and the variety of habitat types within a landscape. It is of fundamental importance to the functioning of all natural and human-engineered ecosystems, and by extension to ecosystem services that nature provides to human society free of charge.

eoearth.org

HAZARDOUS AIR POLLUTANT

Any air pollutant listed or pursuant to section 112(b) of the Clean Air Act. There are 189 regulated toxic chemicals on this list, including asbestos, beryllium, mercury, benzene, coke oven emissions, radionuclides, and vinyl chloride.

epa.gov/ocepat/terms

FOSSIL FUEL

Carbon-based fuels, such as coal, oil and gas, that were formed over millions of years through the decay, burial and compaction of rotting vegetation on land, and of marine organisms on the sea floor. Burning fossil fuels is a major source of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

[More terms at LivingPrinciples.org](http://LivingPrinciples.org)

BIOMIMICRY

A discipline that studies nature’s best ideas and then imitates these designs and processes to solve human problems.

biomimicryinstitute.org

PROCESSED CHLORINE FREE (PCF)

The label used for pulps or papers containing post-consumer recycled fiber that has been processed without the use of any additional chlorine or chlorine compounds. If these papers also contain a percentage of virgin fiber, the virgin fiber must have been processed without the use of any chlorine or chlorine compounds.

mohawkpaper.com

ELEMENTAL CHLORINE FREE (ECF)

The label used for virgin fiber pulps or papers that may have been bleached with chlorine compounds such as chlorine dioxide (ClO₂) as opposed to elemental chlorine (Cl₂).

mohawkpaper.com

TOTALLY CHLORINE FREE (TCF)

The label used for pulps or papers that have been bleached without the use of chlorine or chlorine compounds. TCF refers only to paper with 100% virgin content.

mohawkpaper.com



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FSC CERTIFIED

An independent nonprofit organization devoted to encouraging the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure that the forests they come from are managed to meet the social, economic, and ecological needs of present and future generations.

fscus.org

CRADLE-TO-CRADLE

A material use cycle that seeks to eliminate waste and/or virgin resource extraction through the creation of closed/continuous loops. Cradle-to-Cradle traces a material from the time it is extracted to the point at which it is recycled/reclaimed.

napim.org

SYSTEMS THINKING

An approach to problem-solving that assumes the individual problem is part of a much larger, complex system, and seeks a solution that does not create further, unanticipated problems down the road.

naturalstepusa.org | mbdc.com | LivingPrinciples.org | o2umw.org

UPCYCLING

The remanufacturing of a material into a different product with a different material-use cycle. For example: a PET bottle made into fibers for high performance polyester clothing, which itself can be recycled.

FAIR LABOR | ETHICAL TRADE | FAIR TRADE

A movement that seeks equity and transparency for all international trade producers and partners. Drivers of this movement, like the Fair Labor Association (FLA) and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), seek to create lasting solutions to exploitative labor practices. The Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International (FLO) has a certification program for fair labor products.

fairlabor.org | fairtrade.net | ethicaltrade.org

TRANSPARENCY

An organization's disclosure of their environmental, economic, and social impacts in an effort to assure all players are working toward long-term sustainability goals. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports are often the delivery mechanism.

LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT (LCA)

A systematic set of procedures for compiling and examining the inputs and outputs of materials and energy and the associated environmental impacts directly attributable to the functioning of a product or service system throughout its life cycle.

ISO 14040 Life Cycle Assessment — Principles and Guidelines

RECYCLABLE

As defined by the EPA, a product or package that can be collected, separated or otherwise recovered from the solid waste stream for reuse. 'Recyclable' is one of the few sustainability terms formally enforced by the FTC on product packaging and advertising.

ftc.gov



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ISO 14000

A set of stringent environmental management standards, created by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), which certify products and companies that meet specific processes and practice criteria. It serves as a tool to enable organizations of any size to identify and control the environmental impacts of their activities.

[More terms at LivingPrinciples.org](#)

TAKE-BACK A.K.A. EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY

Take-back is part of extended producer responsibility, a pledge by manufacturers to accept responsibility for a product's life cycle, including "end-of-life" management schemes.

ENVIRONMENTAL FOOTPRINT

The impact on the environment by any individual, company or other entity as it performs an activity or process. A carbon footprint is an assessment of air impact only, whereas a full environmental footprint includes the assessment of water and soil.

[napim.org](#)

END-OF-LIFE

The terminus of a product's useful life and thus the beginning point for its reuse, recycling, or permanent disposal.

DE-INKING

The chemical or mechanical extracting of inks, coatings and pigments from recycled paper so that the fibers can be used again.

[paperhall.org](#)

DESIGN FOR DISASSEMBLY

Designing a product to be dismantled for easier maintenance, repair, recovery, and reuse of components and materials.

WATER FOOTPRINT

The total volume of freshwater used to produce the goods and services consumed by an individual, community, or business. The water footprint is a geographically explicit indicator, not only showing volumes of water use and pollution, but also the locations.

[waterfootprint.org](#)

VOLATILE ORGANIC COMPOUND (VOC)

Carbon-containing compounds that evaporate into the air (with a few exceptions). VOCs contribute to the formation of smog and/or may themselves be toxic. VOCs often have an odor. Typical liquids that release VOCs include gasoline, diesel, pesticides, cleaning supplies, glues, and solvents used in paints.

[epa.gov/ocepaterns](#)

RECYCLED CONTENT

The proportion, by mass, of pre- and post-consumer recycled material in a product or packaging. Some companies count only post-consumer content as recycled.

[mohawkpaper.com](#)

BIOMASS

Organic, non-fossil material that is available on a renewable basis. Biomass includes all biological organisms and their metabolic by-products, including forest and mill residues, agricultural crops and waste, wood and wood waste, animal waste, aquatic plants, and municipal and industrial waste.

[sustainabilitydictionary.com](#)

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VEGETABLE-BASED/SOY-BASED INK

Ink that contains varying amounts of vegetable-based oils to replace petroleum, making it lower in volatile organic compounds (VOCs). The American Soybean Association has developed standards for soy inks and provides a Soy Seal and “Printed with Soy Ink” logo.

BIO-ACCUMULATION

The increased concentration of a substance as it moves up a food web. For instance: mercury, a by-product of burning coal, transforms into methylmercury when it enters water. Small organisms ingest it, and are then consumed by larger organisms. Each step up the food chain results in higher toxicity and more detrimental effects on the consumer.

nwf.org

POST-CONSUMER WASTE (PCW)

Materials or finished products, particularly paper and plastic, that have served their intended use and have been diverted or recovered from the waste stream. Recovered office paper waste makes up the majority of the post-consumer fiber content used in recycled copy and printing papers.

recycledproducts.org | mohawkpaper.com | fscus.org

CARBON NEUTRAL

Carbon neutral, or carbon neutrality, refers to a net zero carbon release, brought about by balancing the amount of carbon released with the amount sequestered or offset.

epa.gov/ocepaterns

NATURAL

The FDA describe natural ingredients as those that are “extracted directly from plants or animal products as opposed to being produced synthetically.” The Natural Products Association (NPA) is working to address the use of the word for personal care products through its certification program.

naturalingredient.org | fsis.usda.gov | npainfo.org

GREEN-E

The United States’ leading independent consumer protection program for the sale of renewable energy and greenhouse gas reductions in the retail market. The Green-e logo means that the product has been certified by an independent third party to meet strict consumer-protection and environmental standards.

green-e.org

OPTIMIZATION

To maximize resource and material efficiency.

For example:

- 1) Designing a product or package to fit the most possible units per case or carton
- 2) Calculating the best possible load balance and number of case units carried by a shipping pallet
- 3) Planning for the best possible materials use per press sheet

GREEN HOUSE GASES (GHG)

A gas, such as carbon dioxide or methane, which contributes to potential climate change.

epa.gov/ocepaterns



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CARBON LABELING

A label disclosing a product's carbon footprint. This concept is still in its early stages, with several competing labels in trial. One example: carbonfund.org offers a Carbon-Free Certified Product label that companies can use to promote their products as climate /carbon neutral.

carbonfund.org

CRADLE TO GRAVE

The full life cycle assessment (LCA) of a product or process, from the extraction of raw materials, through manufacturing and use, to final disposal. This assessment examines the product's net environmental burden, including the consumption of raw materials and energy, emissions to air and water, and solid waste generation.

[More terms at LivingPrinciples.org](https://LivingPrinciples.org)