

“Determining the Provenance and Quality of Green Cabinetry” © A.G. Enyart March 20, 2008

It is the provenance of materials used to create a cabinet’s box, drawers, and doors, as well as the quality of the adhesives, finishes, sealants and paint that determines the degree of green that a cabinet has achieved.

A cabinet box is green, if it is free of urea-formaldehyde resins. These resins are commonly used in plywood, particleboard, medium density fiberboard (MDF), and particleboard adhesives. The resins may release formaldehyde gas, a carcinogen, into homes. See, Stefani Hines article, “*Invisible Threat*” at www.greenbuildermag.com, December 2007, p.59-60. Many manufacturers have been addressing this issue by replacing formaldehyde with a soy-based protein binder – at no extra charge to the consumer.

Particleboard and MDF contains more adhesives than plywood. Most particleboards incorporate some recycled content of varying quantities. Particleboard is heavy, more fragile than wood and it crumbles when exposed to water. The presence of recycled materials is credited as being green.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certifies the provenance of wood products from a sustainable source. FSC veneered plywood performs better and for a longer time, albeit at a greater initial investment than particleboard and MDF. Certified wood can be more expensive than non-certified wood. Visit www.sfiprogram.org for more information on sustainable forestry participants using the FSC label.

Cabinet boxes, drawers and doors are the second criteria a consumer can use to determine the cabinet’s degree of green. The green cabinet box, drawers and doors are either built from hardwood or it has a hardwood frame with a formaldehyde-free center panel.

Regionally sourced American hardwoods, sustainably minimizes the gas and oil to get the product to you, but like traditionally sourced hardwoods, it does not guarantee that it was harvested sustainably. These hardwoods tend to be less expensive than their certified counterparts. Wood products that are rapidly renewable and sustainably harvested in Europe are being increasingly used in the United States.

In addition to environmental and health benefits there are other benefits in purchasing green cabinetry. Green cabinetry can earn credit under the NAHB Model Green Home Building Guidelines, and green millwork and cabinetry can contribute to LEED certification in various categories. Talk with your building contractor, financial advisor or CPA, and your Realtor for more information and visit LEED at www.usgbc.org and NAHB at www.nahb.org.

Adhesives, finishes, paint, and sealants are the third criteria to determine how green are the cabinetries. Low or no VOC products are used in green cabinetry. VOC’s (volatile organic compounds) are chemicals that are typically outgassed from these products. Like formaldehyde, exposure to VOC’s can produce negative health effects. Applications of low-VOC finish and paint require more skill, and labor to apply. One green myth is that water-based finishes do not have VOC’s. There are many water-based finishes that are not low-VOC. For more information on health issues see, www.epa.gov.

There are four basic questions consumers should pose to their green cabinetmaker. (1) Ask for information as to the origination of the wood, and whether those companies practice sustainable harvesting techniques. (2) Specify, if you want FSC or regionally produced products, and whether or not there will be an additional cost for those products. (3) Ask about the level of VOC’s in the finishes, paint, sealants and adhesives and whether there will be an additional cost for the lowest level of VOC’s that are available on the market. (4) You should ask your cabinetmaker for recommendations of green products to clean and protect your investment in green cabinetry. Award winning custom craft Woodlife Cabinets owner Gorky Pacha has the answers to your questions. Call Gorky today at (505) 877.8117 and post www.woodlifecabinets.com as a favorite site for answers and updates on going green sustainably.

Your and other consumer’s environmental philosophy and concern for the increasing number of children and adults with chemical sensitivities are transforming green cabinetmakers and their suppliers. Knowledge of the provenance and quality of materials determines not only the degree of green that the cabinetry has achieved for the interior of a home, but its sustainability in an internal and external environment.