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Assessment sheet for 'eco' building materials

Sometimes it's hard to know just how 'eco' a product is and which materials are best. Often we have to rely on the manufacturer's information, which can be biased and incomplete.

However, there are some commonsense criteria. The checklist on the following page contains the most important, and if you fill it out for the materials you are considering, it will help with your decisions. Photocopy the list (use recycled paper) and fill it out for every material. Everything being equal, the more 'Yes' ticks, the more 'eco' your product.

Of course this method is simplified and you should also consider any other criteria you are concerned about. There are endless things to take into account, such as embodied energy, water use, resource depletion and environmental standards in the country of origin.

When two materials you are evaluating have the same score, you could do some more research to help your decision. But often the choice is not easy, there are no clear answers, and you need to make the choice you are most comfortable with.

One conflict that often occurs is the choice between a local material and a material from Europe or America that is more environmentally friendly. The local material is not transported as far, supports the local economy, and often it is cheaper and it is easier to obtain information about it.

However the first question you should ask yourself is: 'Will this material do the job I want it to do?' It makes no sense to choose a material just because it is environmentally friendly, when it will not perform. This means that it will have to be replaced in the future, using up more valuable resources.

If you need any help or if you would like some information on materials available here in New Zealand, please contact:

The Waitakere City Council on 839 0400, ask for the Eco-Design Advisor

Of course we would also love to hear from you if you have found any new and exciting materials or building practices.





Waitakere City Council
Te Taiāo o Waitakere

Does this material come from a renewable resource? Yes No

Renewable resources are things that regenerate, such as properly managed timber, cork or bamboo. An example of a non-renewable resource is fossil fuels or products derived from it, such as plastics.

Was the material made or grown locally? Yes No

Locally made products require less transport and therefore less energy and fossil fuel input. They also support our local economy (Buy Waitakere).

Is the material durable and of high quality? Yes No

Durable materials don't need to be replaced as often, so resources are conserved.

Is the material safe (non-toxic)? Yes No

Some people argue that some materials might compromise your health, such as: formaldehyde, solvent-based paint and treated timber. Look for safer alternatives or minimise their use where practicable.

Is the production of the material safe/eco-friendly? Yes No

Avoid products that use large amounts of energy in production or cannot be recycled or reused at the end of their life. Minimise the use of products that include toxic components, such as treated timber. For some materials you also need to look at the extraction, such as for aggregates, or clay for bricks. You should also consider the health, safety and wellbeing of the production workers. Choose products that are made from recycled materials or reuse second-hand materials, such as old bricks or windows.

Is the disposal of the product safe? Yes No

Every material becomes waste one day. Avoid materials that will become hazardous waste. Choose materials which can be reused or recycled, or those which are biodegradable.

Are you sure about your answers? Yes No

This accounts for the uncertainty, be honest!
If you are not sure, you could be missing an important effect.
Asbestos and ozone-depleting chemicals are examples that show it is better to be safe than sorry!

