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The EU Ecolabel is the official environmental label of the European Union. Introduced by the European Commission in 1992, it is awarded to products and services that meet ambitious environmental criteria – including detergent products. With revised criteria for detergent products taking effect very likely from January 2027, important changes are ahead for manufacturers. The new requirements raise the level of environmental ambition in areas such as aquatic toxicity, biodegradability, sustainable sourcing, hazardous substances and packaging. Following their presentation at this year's SEPAWA Congress, Dr Kristin Stechemesser from the German Environment Agency explains what is changing, which products qualify and what the new criteria mean for manufacturers.

There are currently six different EU Ecolabel criteria documents for detergent products: hand dishwashing detergents, industrial and institutional dishwasher detergents, dishwasher detergents, hard surface cleaning products, laundry detergents, and industrial and institutional laundry detergents. Why are there six separate documents? And the current criteria date back to 2017 – is that correct?

Thanks a lot for these very good questions. Yes, that is correct. The current criteria date from 2017 and new criteria will very likely apply from January 2027. Then, the existing criteria will remain valid until the end of 2028, giving companies sufficient time to re-certify their detergent products.

The revised criteria will continue to cover six separate product groups because the requirements differ depending on the type and use of the detergent. The family of detergent and cleaning products covers routinely used products that are applied by private or professional users. Two of these six product groups primarily cover products for private users, i. e. dishwasher detergents and laundry detergents. Hard surface cleaners and hand dishwashing cleaners can be used by both user groups while the industrial and institutional dishwasher detergents and industrial and institutional laundry detergents include products for professional use. Having separate criteria documents also makes it easier for companies to find all the requirements relevant to their specific products in one place.

Which detergents can be awarded the EU Ecolabel?

A wide range of detergents can qualify, including all-purpose, kitchen, glass and bathroom cleaners, handwashing detergents, dishwasher detergents (single- and multi-purpose), rinse aids and laundry detergents. These include products for both private and professional use. For professional applications, pre-wash detergents, dishwasher detergent and laundry detergent multi-component systems can be certified.

So, does the EU Ecolabel cover almost all detergents and cleaning products?

No. Only products that are covered by the scope of the criteria are eligible for the EU Ecolabel. Just to mention some examples, the hard surface cleaner product group covers only products that are used indoor, so any product for outdoor use

cannot be certified with the EU Ecolabel. Another example are laundry detergents or pretreatment stain removers with subsequent washing that can be certified whereas fabric softeners or in-wash stain removers are out of the scope of the criteria. If a company is not sure whether a specific product falls into the scope, our certification body RAL gGmbH is happy to support.

Can you explain more in detail the main criteria that detergent products have to meet to qualify for the EU Ecolabel?
Depending on the product group, there are eight or nine criteria. The core requirements cover the toxicity of the product to aquatic organisms, the biodegradability of organic ingredients with special requirements for surfactants, the sustainable sourcing of ingredients made out of palm oil or palm kernel oil and their derivatives, the exclusion and restriction of certain substances in the product formulation, and criteria related to the efficiency and recyclability of the product packaging.

The criteria for laundry detergents include an additional requirement on the allowed maximum used dosage, which is also linked to the user information. The criterion `Fitness for use´ addresses the performance of the product compared to a marketed or generic reference product. The last criteria are related to the user information provided for example on the product packaging and the facultative use of allowed claims with the EU Ecolabel certification.

Compared to the old criteria sets from 2017, are there any new requirements?
The overall structure remains the same, but the revised criteria raise the level of environmental ambition in different areas. For example, the Critical Dilution Volume is significantly lower, reflecting stricter requirements regarding toxicity to aquatic organisms. The new criteria also introduce stricter biodegradability requirements: all surfactants must now be biodegradable under both aerobic and anaerobic conditions, while the permitted share of non-biodegradable organic substances has been reduced.

Requirements for the sustainable sourcing of palm oil have also been strengthened through improved traceability. In future, certification schemes based on a mass-balance approach will no longer be accepted for palm oil. In addition, the use of book and claim schemes is not supported anymore. This provides greater transparency for consumers and public buyers, as the palm oil used in a specific EU Ecolabel detergent must be physically traceable and verified by a certification scheme for sustainable production.

Requirements concerning hazardous substances have also been tightened. The list of completely banned substances has been expanded to include, for example, bisphenols, endocrine disruptors and various harmful preservatives. This provides an even higher level of health protection for users.

Finally, the packaging criterion has been extensively revised in response to the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation. In addition to requirements concerning recycled materials, the recyclability of packaging is becoming increasingly important.

Why is there a separate criterion governing the information that can appear on the EU Ecolabel?
This criterion is more relevant than ever, particularly in light of the EU Directive on Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition, or EmpCo. The directive entered into force on 26 March 2024 and applied from 27 September 2026. It tightens the rules on greenwashing and ecolabels and aims to prevent generic or unclear environmental claims from influencing purchasing decisions without adequate substantiation.

The criterion on ´Information appearing on the EU Ecolabel` provides recommendations for licence holders. For detergents, recommended statements include ´Limited impact on the aquatic environment` and ´Restricted amount of hazardous substances`. For laundry detergents, licence holders can additionally use ´Tested for cleaning performance at 30°C` – or alternatively 20°C – while for other detergents the recommended wording is ´Tested for cleaning performance`.

Does the EU Ecolabel offer companies any further advantages in light of the new rules on environmental claims?
Yes. The most relevant advantage is that the EU Ecolabel is a reliable third-party certification allowed on the market and one of the labels that can substantiate generic claims of overall environmental excellence. This is particularly relevant under the new rules: an EU Ecolabel-certified detergent may, for example, be described as ´green`, and terms such as ´eco` may also be used in the product name – claims that would otherwise be prohibited without the necessary substantiation.

Those sound like strong arguments for deciding for an EU Ecolabel for detergent products. Thank you very much for the interview.

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