

SAN FRANCISCO City must consider environmental impact of purchases

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San Francisco became the first city in the nation Friday to enact a law that requires the city to take public health and environmental stewardship into consideration when purchasing products -- from toilet paper to computers.

The law, which goes by the cumbersome name of Environmentally Preferable Purchasing for Commodities Ordinance, requires city departments to buy products that do as little harm as possible to people and the Earth.

The potential reach of the ordinance is far, from jail uniforms to office carpeting, from street-cleaning suds to construction materials.

The city makes about \$600 million in purchases a year to supply City Hall, the Hall of Justice, fire and police stations, the parks and other municipal operations.

"By exercising our economic power, San Francisco can encourage market development of new products which are healthier and more environmentally friendly," said Supervisor Sophie Maxwell, who worked three years to get the new law on the books.

Mayor Gavin Newsom made it official with his signature during a ceremony in his office attended by environmentalists and public health advocates. The law, he said, "basically says it's better to be safe than sorry ... as it relates to our purchasing powers in the City and County of San Francisco."

City officials say one of the goals is for the law to be used as a model for other jurisdictions. The more that sign on, the more economic incentive manufacturers will have to make environmentally friendly products.

From now on, San Francisco will look at such things as whether products can be recycled, whether they pollute the air or water, their energy efficiency and whether they emit toxic substances that have been found to endanger public health.

The program has been tested on a limited basis for the past several years, and officials report that desirable products are available, and usually don't cost more.

As an example, the city buys 87,000 fluorescent light tubes a year and recently put in an order for ones produced with the least amount of mercury, a toxic substance. The ordinance will not affect every purchase overnight. Instead, when specific products come up for bid the regulations may kick in.

The Department of the Environment, working with community groups, technical experts and other city staff, will set priorities for which products should be assessed for application of the ordinance.

"We may decide as a community that computers are our next item that we want to look at through the lens of environmental and public health," said Debbie Raphael, the city's toxics reduction program manager.

"Traditionally, we have a list of specifications we use to decide which computer to buy," she said. "Those specifications do not include things like how much lead is in them? Can you recycle them? What is their energy use? What it does not mean is that cost and performance is ignored. We're expanding the universe of criteria."

The Department of the Environment will identify products that present threats to human health and the environment and then identify comparably priced nontoxic alternatives that city departments will be allowed to buy. If the product proves too expensive, the department can request a waiver from the city purchaser to buy the cheaper, though more toxic, product.

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