What’s the deal with Apple’s environmental policy?

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You may have heard that Apple recently asked environmental watchdog EPEAT to remove 39 of its products from its registry and informed the organization it will no longer submit its computers for testing.

It seems like an odd request, considering Apple helped create EPEAT in 2006 along with the government and several other big computer players. Plus, factor in how traditionally transparent Apple has been about their environmental impact and it’s enough to make anyone suspicious.

Even Greenpeace [1] just upgraded Apple from an “F” rated company to a “D” rated company, which seems bad but in the world of Greenpeace is sort of good.

So what is happening at Apple?

EPEAT: Saving the world one computer at a time

First, let’s look at EPEAT.

EPEAT, short for Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool [http://www.epeat.net/who-is-epeat/history-2/], was born when the government and other organizations realized there was a need for a program to assess the impact of electronic products on the environment. The point was to create a standard by which institutions and people purchasing multiple products would be able to judge how “green” a product was, and also to encourage companies to work on their environmental policies. For example, the federal government requires 95 percent of their purchases satisfy the guidelines set down by EPEAT.

For criteria [2], the organization has a list of optional and required standards by which products receive a rating of bronze, silver, or gold. The actual criteria includes: packaging, longevity, design for end of life, materials, and energy conservation.

Apple’s environmental policy

But Apple has always been pretty open about their environmental impact. They

freely report Apple was responsible for 23.1 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions in 2011 on their company website.

Plus, they acknowledge 98 percent of that pollution is from products and two percent is from their data centers. As of Thursday, the company boasts a 90 percent reduction in Carbon emissions from Apple TV between 2007 and 2011 and a 50 percent reduction in the iMac between 1998 and 2011. Their entire line of products is lead-free, BFR-free, PVC-free, mercury-free and uses arsenic-free glass. They use vegetable ink for their user guides and renewable tapioca paper for iPhone packaging and make it a point to focus on energy efficiency. The Mac Mini is the most efficient desktop in the world, according to the EPA.

On top of all this, Apple products are all Energy Star rated by the EPA, in some cases going beyond the strict requirements.

So what's the deal?

Clearly, the company is making an effort to be transparent, so why the sudden semi-sketchy departure from EPEAT?

Though Apple hasn't said anything aside from a boilerplate "we love the environment" statement, rumblings on the internet [3] blame the new retina display and the glue used to connect the battery to the hardware. Glue can be tricky when it comes to recycling because it can be difficult to separate the various materials. (Side note: this is the same problem environmentalists have with Keurig cups and the glue that is used to attach the foil lid to the plastic cup.)

The way Apple has designed its 2012 product line—which in theory indicates all foreseeable future products will be made this way—means that it violates the strict guideline of EPEAT, which requires easily separated parts. It could be that simple. They *could* have a master plan to create mercury-coated, lead-based computers covered with endangered tree bark, but I highly doubt the plan is that diabolical. As long as they maintain their Energy Star rating, I think they're in the clear.

Unfortunately, despite my credit card bill, Apple's sales don't depend solely on my own purchases. The problem is, if you recall, many institutions, organizations, schools, and cities use EPEAT guidelines as a way to purchase computers. That was part of the purpose for creation. San Francisco has already banned the purchase of Apple computers and a lot of universities and entities are wondering what will happen in the future.

I'm not saying Apple has the greatest environmental policy in the world, but it seems like they attempt to do minimal damage where they can.

I have no doubt Apple will figure it out. They have a quality product, perhaps they can produce a decent way to recycle the different parts. Until then, let's hope they don't replace everything with PCs.

UPDATE: As of Friday, Apple had announced their decision to renew their relationship with EPEAT, stating leaving the organization was a mistake.

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