



BY PATRICK WHITE

# It May Be **Clean**— But Is It **Green?**

**D**ESPITE ALL THE MONOTONY INVOLVED IN CLEANING TASKS, let it be acknowledged that they certainly provide opportunities to think. So, the next time your mind wanders while you're wiping down counters or pushing a mop across the kitchen floor, ponder this: *Cleaning has the power to change the world.* Really, it's true.

For starters, the health and well-being of students depend on the cleanliness and sanitation of the school nutrition operations that serve them. If that's not reason enough to focus on the task at hand, here's a bit more motivation: The way you clean can have a dramatic impact on the health and well-being of our *planet*. (Suddenly, that mop doesn't seem quite so mundane, does it?)

From the ingredients of the cleaning products you select to the amount of water resources required and electricity consumed, the way you clean your kitchen truly matters. And, like many areas of our society today, "clean" is going green. Cleaning supply manufacturers not only are marketing products boasting an environmentally friendly profile, they are offering strategies to help customers achieve long-term sustainability goals.

## **Keen on Green**

The Green Cleaning Network ([www.greencleaningnetwork.org](http://www.greencleaningnetwork.org)) is a non-profit clearinghouse for information and resources on the topic. The organization defines *green cleaning* as "cleaning to protect health without harming the environment," and it emphasizes that achieving the goal requires more than using the right tools. "A Green Cleaning program goes beyond chemical and equipment choices. It includes policies, procedures, training and shared responsibility efforts that minimize the impact of cleaning materials on the health of building occupants and protect the environment as a whole," states the group.

Mike Muenstermann with Ecolab, Inc. ([www.ecolab.com](http://www.ecolab.com)), a manufacturer of cleaning products and equipment, agrees that green cleaning means taking a big-picture approach. "When discussing green cleaning



## SNAPSHOT

- Green cleaning protects health without harming the environment.
- Eco-friendly ingredients are important, but so are products and procedures that save water and energy.
- Look for products that have been certified by an independent third party.



**Eco-friendly**  
cleaning  
means **making**  
**changes** to  
products *and*  
procedures.



To get the  
**“Green Seal,”**  
a product has to  
be effective.  
A product that  
doesn't work is  
both a waste of  
money for the  
customer and a  
waste of  
resources.

products, people tend to focus on the product itself. 'Green chemistry' is part of it," he explains, "but we try to look at the total sustainability impact. Not only are we looking at the chemistry to make sure it's green, but we're also looking at utility savings, water savings, energy savings."

It's worth noting that the "greenest" cleaning chemical may not be the most sustainable if it requires significantly more resources—more water, hotter water, additional cleaning steps and so on—when used in real-world applications. "The challenge isn't making green chemistry. A lot of people can make green chemistry," asserts Muenstermann. "The trick is to create a total system around it in order to have a true sustainability impact."

In foodservice operations that use dishmachines, for example, that means not only choosing a green detergent, but also establishing a system that uses less water, less electricity, less plastic packaging and so on. Ecolab has developed a monitoring checklist for operators to use with the

dishmachine itself to ensure it's being used with maximum efficiency. Check to make sure that racks are full and that items are cleaned the first time without having to be run through a second or third time, Muenstermann explains.

Similarly, the company has developed a "Wash and Walk" floor cleaner that is enzyme-activated and, thus, designed to be left on the floor. Because it doesn't require a rinse like traditional floor cleaners, it uses half the amount of water. These are the types of sustainable approaches and products, Muenstermann says, that can help operators make the biggest overall impact on the environment—and their bottom line.

#### Getting a Green Light

For many school nutrition operators, sustainability isn't just a feel-good concept; it's a requirement. Several states—New York, Missouri, Maine, Massachusetts and Illinois, among them—have passed laws mandating all

government buildings, including schools, be cleaned with eco-friendly cleaning products. Similar legislation has passed or is pending in other states. Such legislative actions have left operators scrambling to find appropriate products. "There's a lot of confusion in the marketplace right now," asserts Muenstermann. "People are starting to say, 'I need to be sustainable in my operation, but what does that mean?'"

A leading resource that customers—and manufacturers—can turn to for guidance is Green Seal, Inc., a non-profit, third-party certifier of "consumer and institutional products and services that protect the environment from toxic chemicals, noxious fumes and wasted resources." The group has been identifying such products since 1989, and its "eco label" now can be found on more than 3,100 items (a continually updated list of certified products, with links to manufacturers, is available online at [www.greenseal.org](http://www.greenseal.org)).

"We look at products from a life-cycle perspective," explains Linda Chipperfield, Green Seal's vice president of marketing and outreach. "We look at the raw materials, how it is made, what happens at the factory, how it is packaged and whether it is ultimately recyclable, biodegradable or disposable in some way."

Green Seal works by first developing standards for a given category; it has more than 30 different standards for industrial and institutional cleaning products, as well as for hand cleaners and for floor care products. A manufacturer can volunteer to apply to have Green Seal evaluate its products against those standards. In addition to a review of the ingredients used in the product and its packaging, a Green Seal auditor actually visits the production facility to examine how the product is made.

The group also tests the *effectiveness* of the product. "We look at whether or not a product performs as well as other non-green products in that same category," notes Chipperfield. "We won't certify a

product that doesn't meet those performance criteria."

The efficacy component is critical, because a product that doesn't work is both a waste of money for the customer and a waste of resources. And given concerns about food safety, those in school nutrition certainly don't have the luxury of "going green" at the expense of effectiveness! "Including a product's effectiveness as part of the evaluation also helps to fight the myth that green products don't work—they actually do, and we've got the certified products to prove it," says Chipperfield.

If a given product meets the Green Seal standards, the manufacturer is granted the license to use the Green Seal logo on its packaging and related marketing efforts for one year. At the end of the year, the review is conducted again to ensure continued compliance with the standards.

From a marketing perspective, product manufacturers appreciate the third-party certification of their products, Chipperfield explains. "Especially in the industrial and institutional markets, the Green Seal has really become quite a symbol of achievement."

As consumer demand for green products in numerous categories has increased, one of Green Seal's biggest concerns is "greenwashing"—the practice of marketing products as green without independent certification to support those claims. "Some companies just create a green, leafy logo and put it on the product, which makes customers think the product is green," says Chipperfield. "It's a huge, rampant problem. And it's part of the reason that Green Seal exists—to provide a credible voice in a field that's just grown tremendously."

### Source Reduction

One company that has met Green Seal standards for its cleaning products is Portion Pac Chemical Corp. ([www.portionpaccorp.com](http://www.portionpaccorp.com)) and its SFSPac Food

Service Sanitation Systems program, designed for K-12 school nutrition operations. Sustainability is nothing new to the company, notes Chuck Ainsworth, SFSPac division manager. "We were founded on sustainable practices back in 1964, so some other companies are starting to catch on to things that we've been doing from the very beginning."

Key among these sustainable practices is the use of portion-controlled packaging. This creates several environmental advantages, explains Ainsworth: "First, there is energy savings because we don't ship water—we ship concentrated detergent. And all of our cleaning detergents are designed using the rule of one: one pack to a sink, one pack to a mop bucket, one pack to a spray bottle. This helps to

prevent over-use of the cleaning product."

Until recently, Ainsworth points out, many of his competitors supplied cleaning products in 1-gal. jugs or 5-gal. pails, and staff members used the "glug-glug" method when mixing with water. "That leads to a tremendous amount of detergent going down the drain and into the environment," he notes, adding, "And if those detergents contain phosphates or are not biodegradable, the impact on the environment is even greater."

### Green Routines

Education is a very important part of green cleaning, asserts Ainsworth, and SFSPac works with its school nutrition customers to select not only the right cleaning products, but also to use them in



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## Why Go Green When You Clean?

### 1. Help Students Stay Healthy and Learn.

Research shows a clear link between poor indoor air quality, sick students and teachers and poor academic and occupational performance. It is estimated that children miss more than 14 million school days each year to due asthma exacerbated by poor indoor air quality. Green cleaning can help reduce environmental hazards in school facilities.

**2. Protect the Health of Custodial and Cafeteria Staff.** Members of custodial staff—particularly women of child-bearing age—are particularly susceptible to health problems caused by frequent and close interaction with cleaning chemicals and equipment. Choosing safer products and training staff in proper usage can reduce the number of injuries, decrease compensation claims and lower insurance costs.

**3. Increase the Lifespan of Your Facility.** Proper maintenance extends the longevity and performance of building materials and furnishings by preventing damage and premature aging.

### 4. Preserve the Environment.

Traditional cleaning products often contain harmful ingredients that can find their way into drinking water, lakes and streams, adversely affecting plant and animal life. Switching to eco-friendly products can help conserve precious natural resources.

Source: Healthy Schools Campaign

the proper manner. "We help them reduce the amount of water that they use in their facilities. For example, we help them control the number of sink changes they make in their three-compartment sinks," says Ainsworth. "Just by reducing the number of sink changes by one, in a single school, over the course of 180 operation days a year, they are saving thousands of gallons of water. Multiply that out over the number of schools in the district, and the water savings are tremendous."

The company also provides education about food safety, with a goal of promoting best sanitation practices, while also training kitchen staff not to over-use cleaning products, which then unnecessarily enter the waste stream. "It's good for the environment, and there's obviously a cost savings in not over-using products," Ainsworth observes. "We want to help school nutrition operations to become sustainable as organizations, so we try to educate them on all aspects of being eco-friendly."

And, he says, SFSPac is "walking the walk that we talk" as a company, recently switching to the use of hybrid cars and clean-diesel delivery vans. New recycling programs have been instituted in company offices, and all employees voluntarily purchased carbon offsets for their personal commuting. "We want to be sustainable not only in the cleaners that we provide,

but in every aspect of our organization," explains Ainsworth.

### Checking out the Green Scene

In addition to training provided by vendors and purchasing products with third-party certification such as that from Green Seal, there are additional resources available for school nutrition programs that want—or need—to establish a green cleaning program. The following examples are just a few of the many organizations, programs, initiatives, publications and websites you can turn to for more information.

■ EcoLogo ([www.ecologo.org/en](http://www.ecologo.org/en)), a program launched by the Canadian government back in 1988, now provides standards and independent certification for some 120 different categories of green products available across North America. A list of products is available on the organization's website.

■ The Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) recently released the second edition of its *Quick & Easy Guide to Green Cleaning in Schools*. The comprehensive resource package is available through the group's website ([www.healthyschoolscampaign.org](http://www.healthyschoolscampaign.org)), SNA's website ([www.schoolnutrition.org](http://www.schoolnutrition.org)) and by mail. It includes a list of some 500 products that meet HSC's green standards for cleaning products in schools. It takes users through a five-step model to



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—Chuck Ainsworth, SFSPac Food Service Sanitation Systems

help establish a green cleaning program. "It's been remarkable to see how much green cleaning in schools has grown in the 2 years since we released the first guide," says Rochelle Davis, HSC executive director. "There is a growing awareness of the way that cleaning can affect the health of everyone in the building, from students to the custodial staff working closely with the chemicals. In that way, a cleaning program affects student performance, staff attendance and the overall climate of a school."

■ The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the Waste Management Research Center have formed the Greening Schools collaborative initiative ([www.greeningschools.org](http://www.greeningschools.org)) to share information on topics ranging from lowering utility use to finding green cleaning products. The group's website also includes sample lesson plans to help educate students about going green.

■ There are a growing number of consultants offering expertise in green cleaning. For example, The Ashkin Group ([www.ashkingroup.com](http://www.ashkingroup.com)) provides specialized workshops for schools on the use of green cleaners in promoting a healthy school environment. Included is a look at "the impact cleaning has on the environment."

■ The New York State Education Department, as part of 2005 legislation, conducted an *Environmentally Sensitive Cleaning and Maintenance Product School Impact Report* (available online at [www.emsc.nysed.gov](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov)). The detailed report, issued in 2007, found that many schools in the survey had been using green cleaning products even before the legislation was enacted, and that "the main goal of the legislation—to provide environmentally preferable cleaning products for use in schools that are available in the same *form, function and utility*, as traditional products—has largely been achieved." It noted that there now are numerous green cleaning product options available with third-party certification, and it encour-



With today's technology, you can have a product that meets **green criteria**, while also being an **excellent cleaner**.

—Mike Muenstermann, Ecolab



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## SNA Pledges Eco-Allegiance

In October 2008, SNA became an official Participating Organization working with the Healthy Schools Campaign to promote green cleaning in schools. It joins such partners as the American Association of School Administrators, the American Federation of Teachers, the Association of School Business Officials International, Council of Education Facility Planners International, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of School Nurses and the National School Plant Management Association. SNA will work to make the *Quick and Easy Guide to Green Cleaning in Schools* available to its members and will help promote the key elements of the campaign's resource materials.

aged schools to "to try different green cleaning and maintenance products until products are identified that best meet the needs of the schools."

### A Green Clean Slate

One thing is clear, says SFSPac's Chuck Ainsworth: "Green cleaning is not just a fad, it's here to stay." In addition to state mandates regarding the use of green cleaning products, "a lot of districts themselves are starting to dictate sustainable practices," he reports. "And that's a good thing."

Widespread demand for green cleaning

products has helped propel the industry forward, notes Ecolab's Mike Muenstermann. "Thanks to the green cleaning movement, the chemistry of cleaning products has changed quite a bit over the past 10 years," he explains. "Years ago, it was possible to make the chemistry of a cleaning product very green, but it wouldn't necessarily be a very good cleaner. Now, with today's technology, you can have both: a product that meets green criteria, while also being an excellent cleaner." Thinking about that might just put a smile on your face while you're scrubbing away. **SN**



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