

# ECOLABELS:



Green buildings need green products. With the South African green building industry rapidly growing, so does the demand for environmentally-friendly products and materials. But who is filling the gap for a legitimate, locally created ecolabel?

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## THE SOUTH AFRICAN VERSION



“Unfortunately the ability to distinguish between a legitimate eco product and one that is not, remains a grey area, allowing for greenwashing to discredit the genuine supplier. This is a huge concern within the professional building sector, says Jeffares & Green environmental engineer Sally-Anne Käsner, who is part of the team bringing EcoStandard, a new locally created and non-profit ecolabel, on to the market.

Currently there are no homegrown South African assessment tools to certify sustainable building materials, products or services. The South African Bureau of Standards and South African National Standards define standards of practice as minimum compliance, primarily for safety and quality, but do not prescribe or obligate product best practices, nor do these regulate environmental claims. ISO14001



compliance is often referred to by manufacturers as evidence of their environmental concern. However, this relates to standards of an environmental management system for their operations and not specifically to product criteria.

An ecolabel provides a certification logo that indicates that the overall environmental performance of a product has been verified. According to the Global Ecolabelling Network, “In contrast to ‘green’ symbols, or claim statements developed by manufacturers and service providers, the most credible labels are based on life cycle considerations. They are awarded by an impartial third-party in relation to certain products or services that are independently determined to meet transparent environmental leadership criteria.”

“Globally, building valuation and certification systems have been shown to support the growth of green building markets, as they provide crucial means for benchmarking and marketing,” according to Frost & Sullivan environmental technologies analyst Linda Harding in a 2012 article.<sup>1</sup> International examples include Germany’s Blue Angel, which was the first environment-related label established in 1978; also the Scandinavian Nordic Swan, and the European Union (EU) Ecolabel. These labeling schemes have all positively transformed their product markets. The EU’s Ecolabel had issued 53 licenses by 2000 and 1 357 by the end of 2011. This label now features over 17 000 products.

#### ECOSTANDARD

While there are many ecolabels in the world, they are not always readily suited for the South African market and manufacturing context, and applying for them are cumbersome for local manufacturers.

The EcoStandard was established to meet this need. This is a non-profit organisation whose vision is to contribute to the growth and trust of the environmentally concerned South African consumer market by offering transparent disclosure through an objective and robust measurement tool.

To understand the size and needs of the potential market, research was undertaken with representatives of building product manufacturers, building design professionals, building material retailers, and members of the public. Overall, the need for an ecolabel was signified by 87% of the 109 participants with 61% of retailers believing their customers would choose labeled products over non-labeled ones and 78% of consumers indicating the same. When it came to a label’s credibility, 84% would trust it more if it was third-party audited.

The EcoProduct assessment tool was developed by South Africans with domestic datasets for a South

1. [www.prnewswire.com/news-releases-test/departments-of-public-works-gets-behind-south-africas-green-building-movement-92744984.html](http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases-test/departments-of-public-works-gets-behind-south-africas-green-building-movement-92744984.html)





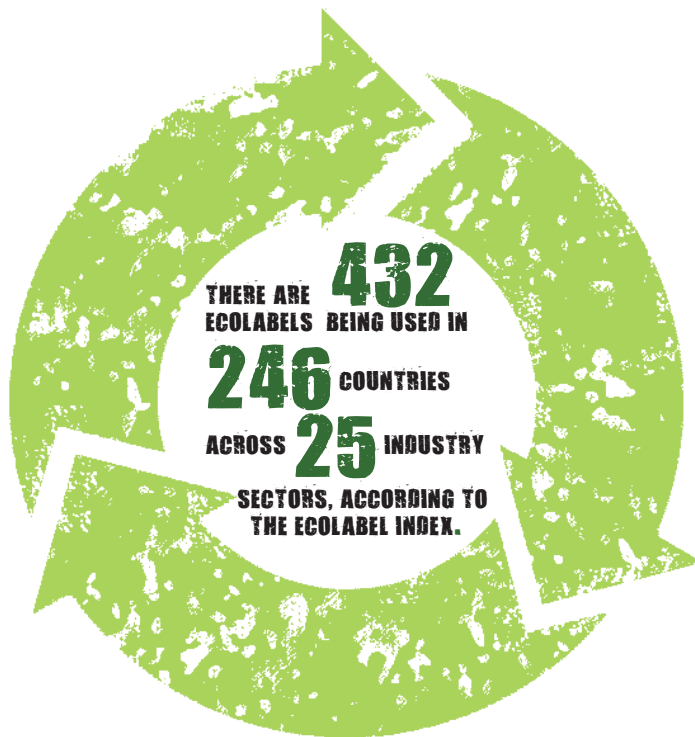
African market, and is “proudly South African”, says Käsner. The tool was launched in a pilot phase in early 2012 with Xanita and LED SA. It aligns with ISO14024, which is recognised as international best practice for procedures and principles for ecolabeling third-party certifiers and therefore incorporates life cycle assessment principles in the evaluation criteria. The tool was reviewed further by an invited technical committee to ensure local relevance and market feasibility.

Manufacturers who are interested in submitting their products for assessment and potential certification, complete a detailed questionnaire and submit their metrics. The legitimacy of all inputs and green claims are third-party audited and on-site verified by Jeffares & Green Environmental and Engineering Consulting, who is an EcoStandard development partner. The products are then scored in a transparent manner according to life cycle assessment principles within five categories:

resources (extraction), manufacturing (production), product (use), packaging & distribution, and end-of-life/recyclability (disposal). Each product receives a performance score within each category, as well as an overall score.

Contrary to many other ecolabels that set minimum thresholds to meet to achieve certification, the EcoProduct rating provides an overall impact score to assist in ranking products within a category or even comparing products of dissimilar categories. Products certified at the minimum performance level would receive the right to feature and market the EcoProduct label along with their score and are listed in a searchable online database of products for consumers. Products that come up short, can engage further with the assessors for guidance on how and where they can improve.

EcoStandard has also recognised that there is a lack of available environmental baseline consumption information. Information such as



the industry average of water required for the manufacture of a ton of steel is only one example of the type of data required to populate formal LCA calculators. EcoStandard, in conjunction with the University of Cape Town, is also embarking on a voluntary information disclosure programme whereby companies submit their energy, water and waste data to be reviewed with the anonymous baseline data to be published free of charge for educational and research purposes, to professionals or the public.

### ECOSPECIFIER

Ecospecifier SA is the South African component of Ecospecifier Global which originated in Australia in 2003 and currently operates in 12 countries. According to CEO Lizette Swanevelder, they imported the Australian ecolabel, Global GreenTag<sup>Cert™</sup>, for use in South Africa and are currently testing it with two local products.

With limited time in the design process for extensive material research, a website such as Ecospecifier can act as a useful research assistant. "Ecospecifier is an online database and educational knowledgebase of life cycle assessed eco and health preferable products, materials and technologies for the built environment," the company proclaims. They provide a desktop research service independently verifying information on a product's environmental performance, and combining it with an online product search interface. Product manufacturers pay

to be assessed according to the verified available information.

The Global GreenTag<sup>Cert™</sup> system is aligned with ISO14024, and uses six key LCA criteria, uniquely including social responsibility. An EcoPOINT score rates the performance against a business-as-usual case and allows for rankings with other products. Each product label is presented as a scorecard of their category results, which may inform specific priority decisions. They also offer a simpler level of assessment specific to green building rating programmes.

Their knowledge base is a useful repository of criteria-related and contextual information on each product category. They provide priority setting guides which detail the issues within particular applications, present eco-related strengths and weaknesses of potential products, and provide whole-of-project context factors useful for decision-making. Additionally, technical guides for each category provide an overview of the relevant environmental issues, typical best practices, supporting research and links for more resources.

The Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA) encourages the development and use of ecolabels, and recognises both EcoStandard and Global GreenTag<sup>Cert™</sup>, which will be correlated appropriately with their Green Star SA tools. Both ecolabels can help guide users to products that will contribute towards credits within the Green Star SA green building rating tools. Manfred Braune, technical executive of the GBCSA, says ecolabels play a significant role in evolving the building industry. "Just like Green Star SA is an ecolabel for buildings and has made an impact, these certifications for products will be transformative tools for the same reasons especially once the market puts value on them." He further mentions that after Australia's Green Star Interiors Tool referenced ecolabels, the uptake for certified products was significant, thus rapidly transforming their market. ●

[www.ecospecifier.com.au](http://www.ecospecifier.com.au)  
<http://ecostandard.co.za>  
<http://globalgreentag.com>