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Retail goes green, from ground up: Businesses seek suppliers that offer non-toxic versions of their raw materials.

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By Ngoc Nguyen

When Robbie Mahlman set out to make a line of chic and organic baby blankets for her El Dorado Hills-based business, she said it wasn't easy to find environmentally friendly fabrics and dyes.

Mahlman said she combed the Internet, looking for suppliers of 100 percent certified organic cotton and finally found a handful. One eventually led her to the company she's working with now.

Businesses and consumers are waiting on California environmental regulators to publish a list of options for turning the state's "green chemistry initiative" – its move to shift its chemical policy toward development of safer chemicals and processes – into reality. But some manufacturers, like Mahlman, have already moved away from using conventional chemicals.

Mahlman's Robbie Adrian Inc. line of high-end baby blankets is crafted from cotton grown without pesticides and non-heavy metal dyes and packaged in recycled paper. She said she opts for safer alternatives because of doubts about traditional chemicals, and because her customers have said they want alternatives.

Against a backdrop of public anticipation and industry apprehension, California's Environmental Protection Agency faces a key policy question: How to spur industry to make and use safer chemicals – the heart of the so-called green chemistry initiative.

Part of the answer is tapping into market forces – the power of consumer choice, regulators said. Trouble is consumers and businesses lack safety data on most chemicals on the market to make informed choices. It can be hard to discern what is toxic and what's not.

That's because many chemicals on the market have not been safety-tested, according to a report released earlier this month by researchers at the University of California. Commissioned by the state EPA, the report described gaps in data and safety regulations for tens of thousands of commonplace chemicals.

The effect of the gaps in data and safety regulations is a "skewed market," researchers wrote in the report.

Consumers can only judge chemicals based on "performance, function and price," said report author Michael Wilson, who is also a UC Berkeley researcher.

Wilson said a chemical's impact on human health and the environment should also be factored into that chemical's data profile and price.

He likened it to safety information provided by automakers. Better safety ratings give them a "competitive advantage," Wilson said.

Baby blanket vendor Mahlman said she believes that safety information is available but is time-consuming to dig up or decipher.

"People just don't have that kind of time," she said, referring to product safety data sheets and ingredient labels in tiny type on a bottle's back. Charles Corbett, a professor of operational and environmental management at UCLA's Andersen School of Management, said putting the burden on consumers to choose safer products is a lot to ask of buyers. Consumers have many labels to sift through – from certified organic and non-toxic to fair-trade and sweatshop-free.

"You can try to reduce something to one single label for the benefit of the consumer, but there's too much complexity to rely on that alone," Corbett said. An organic product packaged in heavily toxic plastic makes for an "odd combination," he said.

Rather than look to consumers to drive industry change, Corbett said, businesses have been more successful at it. One business strategy is to look further upstream and put the burden on suppliers, he said.

"It's hard for us to build and supply a pediatric unit with zero asthma triggers or a cancer treatment center with no carcinogens," said Kathy Gerwig, vice president of workplace safety for Kaiser Permanente. "We're not in a position to test every single product we purchase to see if it has toxic ingredients."

Gerwig said Kaiser has tested products to ensure safety, and when no alternatives were available it worked with product makers to drive the development of safer chemicals. The hospital worked with manufacturers to create polyvinyl chloride-free carpeting and IV bags.

Some changes reaped unexpected results: PVC-free IV bags proved healthier for patients (they do not leech phthalates, Gerwig said) and a phase-out of mercury in medical equipment helped the bottom line.

The per-unit cost of mercury-free medical devices is higher, but the overall cost is lower, when the cost of spill cleanups and disposal is subtracted.

Gerwig said a comprehensive approach to chemical policy is needed. "We can't do it industry by industry or chemical by chemical or initiative by initiative," she said.

Yet, not everyone is on board.

"Most people don't just embrace change for the sake of it," UCLA's Corbett said, instead insisting that a mix of catalysts, including action by consumers and regulators, is needed to spur industry change.

Megan Schwarzman, a UC Berkeley researcher and report co-author, said "policy is key" to achieve sweeping change.

The state adopted energy-efficiency policies in the 1970s that together shifted market forces to produce meaningful change, she said.

For blanket-seller Mahlman and her business partner Susan Doris of Sacramento, the move away from chemicals has paid off. Consumers are snatching up blankets in shades of chocolate, raspberry and eucalyptus, trimmed with ruffled silk, at a cost of more than \$100 for a large-size sheath.

Yes, it's pricey, Doris acknowledged.

But "if you look at harm on environment, the results of people getting sick from chemicals," she said, "if you add all that in to what you're paying, it is equally or less expensive to buy organic."