



# “GREEN” CONSUMPTION



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Towards genuine  
environmental  
transparency?

Research report by the  
Centre québécois du droit de l'environnement  
(Québec Environmental Law Centre, or CQDE)



Whether purchasing a car, food, or electronic devices, consumer decisions have environmental repercussions. In order to be aware of these impacts and, when possible, take action to reduce them, consumers need information about the environmental footprint of the products<sup>1</sup> offered to them.<sup>2</sup>

However, most advertisements, packaging, and other commercial communications provide no information about the environmental impact of the products they promote. In some cases, companies voluntarily disclose certain information for this purpose, **but the information provided is not always accurate, comprehensible, comparable, timely, complete, or verifiable**, preventing consumers from making informed decisions. In a 2023 survey, 23% of Canadian consumers said they were frustrated by the complexity of distinguishing between true and false environmental claims, and 46% refused to pay a higher price for “sustainable” products because they found it difficult to understand certain claims.<sup>3</sup>

Without this information, it is often difficult for consumers to assess the environmental footprint of a given product. This is because the environmental impacts of products often relate to activities that occur during transportation, production, or at the end of a product’s life, far from the public eye. For example, without a label in the store, it is impossible to distinguish a “fair trade” coffee bean from a traditional coffee bean. In such cases, consumers must rely on the companies that manufacture, distribute, or market a product, or on third parties, for information about the environmental footprint of that product.

This situation has two main consequences.

First, this lack of information means that consumers have a **low level of knowledge** about the environmental footprint of the products they consume. For example, according to a 2024 study, only 23% of Québec consumers are able to correctly identify which stage of a food product’s life cycle (production, transportation, packaging, etc.) emits the most greenhouse gases.<sup>4</sup> This lack of knowledge risks reducing consumer awareness of the impacts of their choices and preventing those who wish to reduce their ecological footprint from choosing products with a lower impact.

Second, consumers’ dependence on information voluntarily provided by companies makes them **particularly vulnerable to greenwashing practices**, i.e., the communication of false, misleading, or unsubstantiated information by an organization about its environmental performance in order to create a more positive impression than is actually the case.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, according to a recent Deloitte survey :

**48% of Canadian consumers have doubts about the veracity of companies’ environmental claims.<sup>6</sup>**





Furthermore, according to a 2023 study, less than 40% of Québec consumers believe that claims about environmentally friendly food production practices, such as “organic” certifications, are trustworthy.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, it is possible to reverse this trend through better regulatory oversight of corporate communications regarding the environmental impact of consumer goods.

The current framework already provides for certain obligations. For example, corporate environmental communications are already **generally regulated by misleading advertising laws**, such as the federal *Competition Act* and the Québec *Consumer Protection Act*, which prohibit false, misleading, or speculative claims. However, **these laws apply mainly to statements made voluntarily** by companies to promote the benefits of their products.<sup>8</sup> Thus, they do not require companies to disclose the negative environmental impacts of their products and do not establish specific standards on how to communicate information to consumers. For example, these laws do not impose rules on how to indicate whether a product can be recycled after use, nor on the methods to be used to calculate a product’s carbon footprint.

Numerous voluntary environmental certification programs have emerged in recent decades to make it easier for consumers to identify products with beneficial environmental characteristics. These initiatives are also subject to general rules on misleading advertising, but they are not regulated by specific rules. Although many of them may have credible methodologies, **some private eco-labelling systems do not take into account all of a product’s significant environmental impacts throughout its life cycle**. Furthermore, the coexistence of several hundred certification programs can create confusion among consumers. Finally, these initiatives usually focus on certifying products that are better than average and **therefore do not aim to disclose information about the negative impacts of products**. In other words, consumers learn that a product is better than others, but without knowing whether it is “good” or simply “less bad.”

To ensure that consumers have access to appropriate information about the environmental impacts of the products they buy, **we propose five measures**.

In the context of a multi-faceted environmental crisis, these measures alone will not be sufficient to ensure the sustainability of consumer products and the ecological transition as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, these measures can play an **important role in raising awareness** of the environmental impacts of products and enabling consumers to **make more sustainable consumption choices**. More fundamentally, they are part of the risk management and due diligence measures that companies must implement to ensure environmental compliance in their activities. These measures, combined with other responsible environmental practices by companies, such as source reduction and the integration of circular economy practices, could contribute to a genuine ecological transition in Québec and the rest of Canada.



# ESTABLISH AN ENVIRONMENTAL LABELLING SYSTEM

Governments should establish an environmental labelling system requiring companies to disclose standardized information on the environmental impact of products and the appropriate way to sort them after use in order to promote better management.

This labelling system would be similar to other labelling systems that already exist in Canada, such as nutrition labelling on food products and health warnings on tobacco products. It would complement environmental labelling initiatives already announced by the governments of Québec and Canada, including labelling requirements for the recyclability of certain plastics. Such a system could be implemented by both the federal and provincial governments.

In the short term, this system would include the following targeted labelling requirements:

→ **Mandatory disclosure of targeted environmental impact indicators** for all product categories for which such data exists or could be easily obtained by the companies that market them. This could take the form, for example, **of mandatory eco-labels** indicating the energy performance of appliances, their durability, and their repairability according to a numerical or alphabetical rating. It could also take the form **of indications for products with a high environmental impact**, similar to those found on tobacco products or those that will be required as of 2026 for certain food products with a high sodium, sugar, or saturated fat content.

→ **Mandatory disclosure of sorting instructions** for all products (including packaging) that are likely to be composted, returned, recycled, disposed of, or otherwise managed by consumers. This could be done by requiring **the systematic disclosure of a sorting symbol** that indicates how to sort a product after use, similar to the symbols used in France and the United Kingdom. This disclosure should be separate from that of environmental impacts. Sorting instructions are **not always a good indicator of a product's overall environmental impact**. For example, a product can be both recyclable and have a high environmental impact.



**In the longer term, a comprehensive environmental labelling system** should be developed by governments to promote the disclosure of the environmental impact of all products marketed to consumers. This system **would go beyond the data that already exists** or could easily be obtained by companies, as it would be based on new data collection requirements and the establishment of public databases on environmental impact, thereby facilitating the combination of primary and secondary data by companies.

The labelling established under this system could **take the form of aggregate ratings** that provide a quick overview of a product's significant environmental impacts throughout its life cycle. For example, the labelling could feature alphabetical or numerical ratings classifying the impact from low to very high for each of the following impact categories: climate, biodiversity, pollution, and natural resource extraction. Impact indicators would **be required to appear in all promotional communications relating to a product**, including packaging and advertising. The rules for presenting sorting instructions would continue to exist alongside this system.



## RAISE THE BAR FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CERTIFICATIONS

Some companies may use certification bodies to corroborate their environmental claims, although this does not always guarantee that these claims are truthful, non-misleading, and substantiated by evidence. **A certification program may be insufficient** if its criteria are not stringent enough or do not cover all of the environmental impacts of a product's life cycle, or if compliance verification is not rigorous and independent. In addition, misleading logos or names can give a false impression of the environmental benefits of certified products.

To address these issues, the government should **impose minimum rules on private environmental certification programs** to ensure their quality. Such rules could be adopted by both the federal and provincial governments, in particular by adopting a dedicated regulatory system or, if necessary, amending existing laws on misleading advertising.

The rules should be based on ISO 14024, which requires that an environmental certification program cover the product life cycle, be independent, conduct regular reviews of criteria, and publicly disclose its specifications. Companies using certification marks should be required to provide evidence of their compliance with the program in question and clearly explain the criteria of the certification program to the public.



Finally, the rules should provide guidance on the use of ecological compensation (e.g., planting trees or restoring ecosystems to offset GHG emissions or the destruction of natural environments) and conflicts of interest. To ensure implementation of this initiative, the government could create a **mandatory registration system for private environmental certification programs**, which would both ensure that they meet minimum quality standards and provide a comprehensive database for public education purposes.

Finally, governments should **establish new public environmental certification programs** for certain categories of commonly used claims that frequently raise integrity issues, such as net-zero claims or the use of voluntary carbon offset credits. This measure would ensure that these claims are systematically verified by an independent third party and comply with high and uniform performance criteria. These initiatives could be modelled on existing public certification programs, such as the federal organic food certification system and provincial programs for reserved designations and value-added terms. Such initiatives should include rigorous criteria regarding the specifications to be met and the context in which certified claims may be used.



## REQUIRE DISCLOSURE OF EVIDENCE SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL CLAIMS

Since the amendments to the *Competition Act* in June 2024, organizations that make claims about the environmental benefits of their products, activities, or businesses in order to promote a product or commercial interest **must have evidence** to support those claims. However, **the law does not enable the public to easily access this evidence**, which limits transparency and makes it difficult to identify cases of greenwashing. For example, how can we know if a claim of net-zero is credible without access to evidence to support that claim?

To make it easier to detect cases of greenwashing, the federal government should amend the *Competition Act* **to require that evidence for environmental claims be made publicly available** as soon as such a claim is communicated. This disclosure could be accomplished by including a hyperlink or QR code. The **regulatory burden associated with the measure would be minor**, since companies are already required to maintain evidence to support their environmental claims. It would simply require companies to publicly disclose the evidence they already have in their possession.

Similar measures could be implemented at the provincial level under the *Consumer Protection Act*.



# 4

## STEP UP ENFORCEMENT OF MISLEADING ADVERTISING LAWS

Current laws on false or misleading advertising, such as the *Competition Act* and the *Consumer Protection Act*, apply to companies' environmental claims, including claims based on private certification programs. In recent years, **a number of complaints of greenwashing have been filed** with the Competition Bureau of Canada and the Québec *Office de la protection du consommateur*. In addition, certain enforcement measures have been taken against offending companies. Furthermore, the Competition Bureau of Canada's 2025-2026 Annual Plan mentions its intention to continue the fight against greenwashing,<sup>10</sup> and the agency published guidelines on environmental marketing in June 2025.<sup>11</sup> The Québec *Office de la protection du consommateur* should draw inspiration from these guidelines.

That said, the intensity of enforcement activities by public authorities – both federal and provincial – with regard to misleading advertising is difficult to assess, as agencies **do not disclose the number of complaints handled or the number of investigations initiated** in relation to greenwashing. Furthermore, the confidential nature of the authorities' investigations makes it impossible to obtain information on their progress. In fact, neither agency has published a report on its efforts to combat greenwashing. Finally, **neither agency systematically monitors** environmental claims, leaving the public and civil society organizations with a disproportionate role in identifying potential cases of greenwashing.

To remedy this situation, the Competition Bureau of Canada and the *Office de la protection du consommateur* should:

- **Publicly report on their enforcement activities** in relation to greenwashing cases, as is done by the French Directorate-General for Competition, Consumer Affairs, and Fraud Control (*Direction générale de la concurrence, de la consommation et de la répression des fraudes*).
- **Proactively monitor companies' environmental claims.** To do so, agencies could consider adopting automated IT tools to more easily monitor claims made online. In appropriate cases, they could also consider taking extrajudicial enforcement measures, such as sending warning letters, before taking formal action in cases of non-compliance.
- **Create teams dedicated to environmental issues.** This would enable agencies to improve their ability to identify and address cases of greenwashing to better protect the public. Other law enforcement authorities, such as the Québec *Autorité des marchés financiers*, have recently created such teams.<sup>12</sup>



## 5

## PROHIBIT CERTAIN ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIONS CONSIDERED INHERENTLY MISLEADING

The Québec and Canadian governments should ban certain advertisements that are inconsistent with their environmental commitments, particularly those promoting carbon-intensive products or fossil fuel companies. Such measures are currently the subject of private bills in British Columbia and at the federal level. In addition, the use of misleading and generic terms such as “sustainable” or “environmentally friendly” should be explicitly prohibited, as is the case in Europe. Although we consider these terms to be already implicitly prohibited under the *Competition Act*, this interpretation should be made explicit to avoid any debate.



1. Nous incluons la fourniture de biens et de services dans le concept de « produit ».

2. Saulais et Espougue (2024).

3. Idem.

4. Idem.

5. Montgomery et al. (2024).

6. Deloitte Canada (2023).

7. Marcellis-Warin et al. (2023).

8. Dans certains cas, l'omission d'information importante peut également mener à des sanctions.

9. Même avec une information complète sur les caractéristiques environnementales des produits, plusieurs facteurs peuvent limiter l'impact de la consommation responsable. Ainsi, des mesures complémentaires doivent également être envisagées, telles que l'interdiction de produits polluants, l'établissement de standards environnementaux minimaux, et l'intégration de l'impact environnemental dans les prix via des taxes, des redevances ou des subventions. Voir: Tzilivakis et al. (2012).

10. Bureau de la Concurrence Canada (2025b).

11. Bureau de la Concurrence Canada (2025a).

12. Autorité des marchés financiers (sans date).

*Le Centre québécois du droit de l'environnement has received funding from Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada's Canadian Consumer Protection Initiative. The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada or of the Government of Canada.*