

AT & T, Sprint Launch Environmental Crackdown

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The wireless industry is no stranger to the halo effect going green can have on a company, but AT&T and Sprint are taking their green initiatives a step further with mandatory rules for their suppliers.

AT&T is cracking down on unnecessary device and accessory packaging in an effort to lessen the environmental impact of its products. The operator is working to use less plastic and paper by doing basic things like changing the packaging for batteries and data cables to small, recyclable paper boxes from plastic clam shell-style packaging.

AT&T aims to cut more than 60 percent of paper packaging and 30 percent of plastic packaging, and it is also switching to non-petroleum-based ink. The carrier estimates that the packaging improvements for device chargers, cases, batteries and data cables will help to avoid more than 200 tons of wasted plastic and paper in 2010.

"These improvements are sound business decisions, but more importantly, they significantly reduce the impact of this packaging on the environment," said AT&T Devices Senior Vice President Jeff Bradley in a statement. "This is a small but meaningful next step that AT&T decided to take, and we are pleased to deliver new packaging alternatives that are recycled, can be recycled and generate less waste."

AT&T already has a series of ambitious environmental goals that will begin to take effect this year. A majority of its new devices will use the GSMA Universal Charging Solution and three-quarters of AT&T's new devices will be at least 65 percent recyclable.

The operator also mandated that all new devices be compliant with the European Union's Restriction of Hazardous Substances mandate, which restricts the use of lead, mercury and other hazardous materials used in electronic equipment. In addition, AT&T's suppliers will be required to assert that all devices delivered to AT&T have avoided virgin materials mined in conflict zones within the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

"We have been working closely with our device manufacturers to establish environmentally friendly manufacturing standards that can be implemented now," Bradley said. "This is the beginning of an ongoing collaboration with our suppliers, and we'll explore together more ways to soften our impact on the environment."

For its part, Sprint announced in late February that its handset vendors must comply with new environmental design specs based on a green scorecard it developed with its manufacturers.

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Sprint CEO Dan Hesse said in testimony before the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet that every vendor that makes handsets for the company's network must meet or exceed the company's environmental standards. The company also has pledged that at least 90 percent of its supplier spending will go toward companies that comply with environmental standards.

Sprint also redesigned its accessory packaging. The new designs are 20 percent to 40 percent smaller, PVC-free, use non-petroleum-based inks and use paperboard certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

Verizon Wireless also launched energy-saving initiatives for company operations but has not announced handset guidelines similar to those enacted by Sprint and AT&T. Most U.S. carriers, including Verizon, AT&T, Sprint, U.S. Cellular and T-Mobile USA, have handset recycling programs.

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