

The REI Sustainability Standards and bluesign®

Working together to drive sustainability in the outdoor industry

Chemical management of products is complex and challenging. It happens high up in the supply chain, and chemical compounds are not visible to the naked eye. Even if you think you're purchasing a responsibly made garment, how can you be sure? For example, you may buy a recycled nylon rain jacket, but do you know which chemicals are in the waterproof coating or dyes?

The REI Product Sustainability Standards

As more and more consumers expect products to be made in a more sustainable way, there's an increasing number of companies integrating sustainability practices into their operations. One U.S.-based company, REI – which has long believed that to protect the outdoors it needs to incorporate sustainability into its own design process—wants to be part of that change and empower other companies to take on the challenge of improving how they make their products.

REI is a national outdoor retail co-op in the outdoor industry. With sales of \$2.8 billion (2018), the company has 18 million members and sells over 1,000 brands. They have taken a leadership position in the outdoor industry with the goal of working with brand partners to raise the bar on product sustainability and making it easier for customers to find more sustainable products.

Because of the company's size and reputation, REI has the ability to have a significant positive influence on the brands they carry, as well as serving the needs of customers who are becoming more acutely aware of the environmental crisis.

REI took product sustainability to the next level in April 2018, when they released the [REI Product Sustainability Standards](#). The standards outline REI's expectations of all brands sold at REI, including REI's store brand, and how they collectively manage key environmental, social and animal welfare issues. REI identified preferred attributes as the most credible, relevant and impactful sustainability certifications that they encourage brands to pursue, such as bluesign® approved materials or bluesign® products or materials, and responsibly sourced or fair-trade certifications.



Genna Heath, sustainable chemistry program manager at REI

"If you think about it, all of the things customers are increasingly concerned about – clean air, clean water, climate change – all of these issues come down to chemistry," says Genna Heath, sustainable chemistry program manager at REI. "Chemical management is at the foundation of sustainably progressive product development."

While the standards set a high bar for REI and its vendors, they were not developed with a one-size-fits-all approach.

"We felt strongly about developing standards that were impactful yet feasible for the diverse set of brands we work with," says Heath. "And our ultimate goal is for all brands to transition to bluesign® and other recognized standards over time, like fair trade certification."

While some of the standards revolve around what REI calls "brand expectations," like adhering to a restricted-chemicals list, other standards are referred to as "preferred attributes," such as working toward being a bluesign® system partner. Because the Sustainability Standards include existing, highly credible systems like bluesign®, Fair Trade USA and other third-party verification organizations, brands that want to improve their sustainability efforts don't have to create separate systems.

Most companies already practice regulatory compliance and follow industry standards or government requirements, partly as a way to avoid risks. But by adopting the Sustainability Standards, brands who sell to REI not only are recognized as being part of bluesign®, fair trade and other third-party certifications, they also stand out to customers that are looking to spend their money with progressively responsible companies.

EDELRID, an industry leader and early bluesign® system partner

EDELRID, a 156-year-old company based in Germany, has made sustainability a cornerstone of their company philosophy. In 2009, the company produced the industry's first climbing ropes meeting bluesign® criteria. That same year they began supplying climbing gear to REI. Two years later, the company began making most of their slings and all of their climbing ropes under the bluesign® system. Not only is sustainability a priority for EDELRID, it's also a priority to their core customers.

"We serve a climbing community and they spend a lot of time in nature," says Thomas Hodel, Brand Manager for EDELRID. "Our customers and our employees, many of whom are climbers, are reacting to changes in our society and to the effects of climate change. There's also a high awareness of the importance of chemical control."

Organizing the company operation for voluntary and regulatory compliance started in 2008, when EDELRID ramped up to meet bluesign®, [ISO 14001](#) and [EMAS standards](#). While some standards overlap, bluesign® creates a foundation for any type of chemical management or reporting requirements.

“bluesign® is part of our environmental approach,” says Christian von Wahlert, Head of Eco Management and Legal Affairs. “It’s a way to monitor responsible production from inputs to final products.”

When the REI Sustainability Standards were released last year, EDELRID welcomed the ambitious goals set for their company and the outdoor industry.

“It’s great to be partnered with REI,” says Hodel. “It’s also good that we already meet some of the requirements. REI can use its influence to lead more companies towards becoming more sustainable.”

ENO and the bluesign® brand assessment

Almost 20 years ago, the company ENO (Eagles Nest Outfitters) sparked the hammocking culture with products built for nomadic adventurers. Based in Asheville, North Carolina, and with a staff of around 25 people, ENO sells their products to various retailers, including REI.

When REI came out with its Sustainability Standards, ENO assembled a team and a plan to address sustainable chemicals management. Over the course of about four months, ENO dove into a Brand Assessment process with bluesign® – one of the first steps a company takes toward becoming a bluesign® system partner and receiving market products under bluesign® approved certification.

How did that go? It was not an easy task for this small company, where employees wear many hats.

“It was a lot like open-heart surgery,” says Ryan Klinger, ENO’s product team director. “Product sustainability wasn’t a primary focus before the standards came out,” says Klinger. “But the way the standards are framed made it possible for us to take the first steps and to focus on milestones.”

The brand assessment was a collaborative process that involved leadership, purchasers, marketing and product developers, and dug deep into the ENO supply chain.

“The brand assessment just puts it all out there,” says Klinger. “You see your strengths and weaknesses, and can clearly identify the most critical priorities to focus on.”

ENO is in the process of identifying other ways they can meet the REI Sustainability Standards, including moving forward with the suggestions that arose from the bluesign® brand assessment, and working toward eventually becoming a bluesign® system partner.

“Transparency equals trust, and we’re committed to making our products more sustainable,” says Klinger. “We want our customers to be confident in the integrity of our products, all the way down to the chemical level.”