

The Society of Environmental Journalists sponsored a Green Chemistry panel on Sept. 8 as part of its National Conference at Stanford. The session, well attended by journalists from across the country, included panelists Mike Wilson of U.C. Berkeley; John McIsaac of Columbia Forest Products; Jennifer Harris from XenoPort and the Silicon Valley Leadership Group; and Mark Schapiro of the Center for Investigative Reporting. Marla Cone of the Los Angeles Times was moderator of the panel. Here are some of the key issues and emerging options offered by the panelists:

- In his new book, “Exposed: The toxic chemistry of everyday products and what’s at stake for American power,” Schapiro warns that U.S. consumers are becoming a “dumping ground” for goods – from cosmetics to plastics to toys to electronics – that a growing number of nations deem too toxic for their citizens. New regulations adopted in the European Union, the world’s largest economic trading bloc, are increasingly being adopted in other nations, including China and Mexico, as global environmental protection and leadership shifts from Washington to Brussels. He said that, absent complete information, consumers are unable to make informed choices, an example of market failure.
- Wilson said changes in industrial chemistry will require a massive shift in the industrial-chemical sector as industry enters an “unchartered wilderness.” He said China, Japan, South Korea and Europe are moving rapidly to adopt Green Chemistry practices. He called for reforms to state and U.S. laws to fix: the data gap, so companies disclose toxic substances to workers and consumers; the safety gap, so government can use the toxic substance information to identify and prioritize chemical risks; the technology gap, so business, government and academia can innovate green chemistry technologies. He described the establishment of a Consortium on Green Chemistry at UC Berkeley, possibly headed by a Dow Chemical executive. He said the California Dept. of Toxic Substances Control Division will need to expand its staff to launch a Green Chemistry program.
- Harris praised the California Dept. of Toxic Substances Control Division Green Chemistry initiative, but questioned whether it will be an ongoing dialogue or a series of regulations. She also questioned how to integrate Green Chemistry into curriculum, research and development, finance and engineering. She asked whether small businesses should be included in a Green Chemistry program. She urged more education for business groups and involvement of UC Extension.
- McIsaac recounted the intense opposition his company faced from its trade organization and the chemical industry when it replaced formaldehyde in plywood with a soy-based adhesive. He said continued industry resistance to new, anti-formaldehyde regulations adopted by the California Air Resources Board slows introduction of clean, new products that he says perform just as well as the more toxic products that were replaced. Meanwhile, he described how Chinese companies continue to ship large amounts of formaldehyde-soaked plywood to the United States, though the product is banned for use in the EU and China.