

CHAMPION



Man on a mission: Led by Executive Director Michael Green, CEH also helps big companies be more eco-friendly.

## Center for Environmental Health crusades

### Consumer group often wins its legal skirmishes

BY MICHELE CHANDLER

San Francisco Business Times Contributor

In its mission to create a safer environment, the Center for Environmental Health uses both carrots and sticks.

It works with companies to remove harmful chemicals from products and adopt sustainable disposal plans. But it also doesn't hesitate to head for court when gentle persuasion is unsuccessful.

Early this year, CEH helped broker an agreement that pulled women's handbags and wallets from store shelves after finding the accessories contained as much as 100 times as much lead as is federally allowed in children's items. Other plastic products, including vinyl baby bibs, soft lunchboxes and raingear, are no longer being sold by retailers nationwide after the group's investigations found high lead levels in those items as well.

"The idea about chemicals being put out

in the marketplace until they're proven hazardous is something we'd like to see changed on the policy level," said Charles Margulis, communications director for CEH. "We'd like to see it be as it is in other countries, where chemicals have to be demonstrated safe before they are used in the marketplace."

But the consumer group has also amassed an impressive record in court. In 2001, the organization sued 30 makers of playground equipment made from arsenic-laden wood; within two years, the entire industry had stopped distributing the contaminated structures. And legal action initiated by CEH led to a state law banning all leaded wheel weights in 2009. Weights that routinely fell off cars and trucks were releasing 500,000 pounds of lead that eventually contaminated drinking water, making them one of California's largest unregulated sources of lead pollution.

CEH also routinely assists major companies that are striving to become more eco-friendly. For example, the group announced in mid-May that it had drawn up guidelines adopted by Kaiser Permanente and Catholic Healthcare West to help the leading nonprofits purchase sustainable electronics equipment. Under the voluntary agreement, the two health care companies will purchase electronic products with the fewest toxic chemicals and make sure the items can be safely recycled.

Kathy Gerwig, Kaiser Permanente's vice president and environmental stewardship officer, says CEH is an effective negotiator because of its vast technical expertise and long-standing credibility in health care circles. "If they are asking us to partner with them on something, we know it's a legitimate issue worthy of our focus and attention," said Gerwig, who has worked extensively with CEH over the years and is a member of the group's board of directors.

In 2003, CEH sponsored the first national conference on green building to prepare health care gearing up for new mandates that hospitals be earthquake-resistant. The nonprofit's work promoting green building in health care also led to a 2003 award from the Architects, Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility.

In the future, Margulis said, the group intends to expand its focus to include a new area of concern: sustainable disposal methods for solar panels and hybrid car batteries.

#### CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

**Location:** Oakland.

**Executive director:** Michael Green.

**Founded:** 1996.

**Employees:** 16.

**What it does:** This nonprofit environmental group works directly with business leaders to promote safe products and business practices.

*San Francisco Business Times* ran this article to report CEH's selection as "Green Business Champion" for 2010.