



# EPEAT Criteria Updates

## Will decades of fierce competition finally end?

by: Tricia Judge, International Imaging Technology Council

Unlike the more mature and civil BTA Channel, the printing supplies industry has been volatile since the personal printer first appeared in the early 1980s. The printer OEMs employed a razor-and-blade economic model, allowing for original printer purchases at low price points, but making the supplies more expensive and lucrative.

This scenario created an unintended opportunity for entrepreneurs to collect the valuable empty printer cartridges and restore them for resale. Suddenly, the OEMs had unexpected competition for their supplies business, and the two factions have competed ferociously ever since.

It is against this backdrop that the EPEAT Technical Committee for imaging equipment and consumables convenes to try and reach an agreement on how to make printers and printer supplies better for the environment. Last year, OEM representatives, remanufactured cartridge representatives and institutional consumers of supplies met for two hours every few weeks to achieve that goal.

The Global Electronics Council (GEC), a mission-driven nonprofit organization established in 2006, manages the EPEAT ecolabel. The GEC's revised criteria for imaging equipment include life-cycle-based criteria organized around four priority sustainability impact areas for electronic products: Climate Change Mitigation, Sustainable Use of Resources, Reducing Chemicals of Concern and Responsible Supply Chains. Imaging equipment manufacturers must demonstrate that their EPEAT-registered products meet these criteria, as well as criteria specific to the ability of the imaging equipment devices to run environmentally preferable consumables. EPEAT has three registration tiers — Bronze, Silver and Gold. All three tiers represent sustainability leadership. EPEAT Bronze products are verified as meeting all required criteria. The Silver and Gold tiers use optional criteria to incentivize innovation, competition and increasing levels of sustainability leadership.

The EPEAT logo has become universally accepted and recognized. It is used by manufacturers, resellers, dealers, and business and private consumers to promote and ensure the purchase of environmentally sustainable electronic products.

The following companies have been awarded EPEAT designations: Canon, HP, Lexmark, Ricoh and Xerox. All display EPEAT logos on their websites or in product literature. All of these companies also had representatives on last year's EPEAT Technical Committee, along with representatives



from governmental organizations, sustainability nonprofits and the remanufactured cartridge industry.

EPEAT criteria aim to encourage sustainable practices among electronics manufacturers, including addressing concerns about product longevity and compatibility with remanufactured or non-OEM components. The previous iteration of the criteria provided that certified products must allow the use of remanufactured cartridges.

The criteria read: "Manufacturer shall ensure registered products do not prevent the use of remanufactured cartridges, either manufacturer or non-manufacturer branded," and offered very little other guidance.

It was very difficult to get that provision included 10 years ago, and it was clear that it would be the linchpin of the deliberations last year. It was.

For almost 30 years, I have represented cartridge remanufacturers on that committee. It is a formidable process that requires diplomacy and patience with the OEMs' positions. It also requires measured advocacy in support of the positions of cartridge remanufacturers.

Last year, the stakes were even higher, especially since OEM firmware updates that disable remanufactured cartridges from working in a printer after installation have proliferated. It has been the International Imaging Technology Council's (Int'l ITC's) position that this practice is a violation of the EPEAT criteria.

The GEC had received several complaints from cartridge users and aftermarket trade groups, several of which had

representatives on the committee, including three I filed on behalf of the Int'l ITC, regarding the firmware updates.

Last year's EPEAT Technical Committee representatives were committed to the challenge of closing exploited loopholes and improving the sustainability goals of EPEAT. All the representatives took this charge very seriously, with each coming to the table to try and advance his (or her) own company's agenda while balancing that against the collective desire to improve the printing industry's environmental impact.

HP, in particular, has been criticized for using firmware updates to block remanufactured cartridges. This practice has faced increased scrutiny as sustainable products have become increasingly preferred.

The GEC is charged with undertaking the criteria development process and in policing the established guidelines. The GEC also has the difficult job of moving the criteria development forward when the participants have such conflicting points of view.

### The New EPEAT-IECC-2024 Criteria: Use of Remanufactured Cartridges

The simple language of the last iteration of the criteria, set forth above, which is referred to as section 8.1.3, has been replaced with much more complex — and concrete — language that addresses the firmware problem head on:

“Manufacturer shall ensure registered products do not prevent the use of remanufactured cartridges, either manufacturer or non-manufacturer branded, by implementing one or more of the following options: Refraining from issuing firmware updates that intentionally disable remanufactured cartridges that, at the time of the firmware update, use aftermarket electronic circuitry to operate with the registered product's then-current manufacturer firmware.” We refer to this as option one, and it addresses remanufactured cartridges that use aftermarket chip technology.

Option two addresses remanufactured cartridges that reuse the OEM chip technology. Remanufacturers have found that reusing (or resetting) OEM chips often ensures that firmware updates will not have any impact, however the cartridges often lost several desirable functions once reset. It provides that “manufacturers can make available a manufacturer-approved solution using unmodified original manufacturer electronic circuitry that ensures registered products permit the use of remanufactured cartridges,” and must also ensure that “key functionality” such as full and continuous acceptance of the remanufactured cartridge, and without having printers display “inflammatory message(s)” such as “may be counterfeit” during installation and throughout use.

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The third option is one that allows OEMs to be compliant as long as they provide their own lines of remanufactured cartridges for their registered products. Some aftermarket and consumer representatives took issue with option three because it allows an OEM the ability to continue issuing firmware that locks out remanufactured cartridge competition, merely by making one remanufactured cartridge available to the public. Or, the manufacturer can use option three to completely control the flow of its empties — also in frustration of competition and the environment, as we have no guarantees that they will remanufacture all of the ones that could be remanufactured.

The criterion attempts to guard against these practices by requiring the OEMs to publicly report on the remanufactured cartridges they put on the market. Its efficacy will be reviewed when the criteria are updated.

Clearly, cartridges remanufactured under option one are the best for those who are truly seeking the best alternative for the environmental impact, competition and consumer choice. Several institutional buyers who participated said that they might contractually require that their printer suppliers elect option one.

All of the new updated criteria, including these new provisions, will be activated on Nov. 1, 2025, when products meeting the updated criteria will begin to appear on EPEAT's registry. (Other provisions address take-back programs, indoor air quality emissions, recycled office paper, duplexing and other printing issues that have an environmental impact or aspect.)

According to the GEC, the EPEAT framework encourages dialogue and voluntary compliance rather than imposing strict bans, so the effectiveness of the new criteria will depend heavily on how manufacturers comply with them.

So, will these new initiatives actually increase the use of remanufactured imaging supplies? Will the OEMs actually embrace the use of remanufactured cartridges as opposed to the decades of fierce competition and even remanufactured cartridge defaming? Will there be increased awareness among purchasers to demand compliance with sustainability standards?

Those questions will not be answered until early 2026 as the OEMs react to the new criteria. In the meantime, the Int'l ITC will be monitoring and hoping that the OEMs and cartridge remanufacturing community are finally laying down arms and becoming more like the BTA Channel. ■

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