

# NEWS RELEASE

Media Contacts: Dr. Nicole Darnall, 919/515-5034 or  
nicole\_darnall@ncsu.edu  
Chad Austin, News Services, 919/515-3470 or  
chad\_austin@ncsu.edu

Dec. 4, 2003

## **Professors Propose Framework for Greener, Cleaner Environment**

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Do organizations that participate in voluntary environmental programs truly adhere to the standards set by those guidelines?

A new study by North Carolina State University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professors could help pave the way for a classification system for such initiatives that would create heightened levels of accountability for firms that claim to be environmentally friendly.

Dr. Nicole Darnall, assistant professor of public administration at NC State, and Dr. JoAnn Carmin, assistant professor of urban studies and planning at MIT, have developed a classification system for voluntary environmental programs based on research into the programs' design and effectiveness. The two presented their research findings to officials from the Environmental Protection Agency and to colleagues at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management's annual conference in Washington, D.C., last month.

Voluntary environmental programs are codes, agreements or commitments sponsored by industries, government agencies or third-party organizations that encourage but do not lawfully require firms to reduce waste and pollution. Such programs became popular among corporations during the 1990s, and are increasingly so today.

Firms that participate in voluntary environmental programs often receive recognition and regulatory and market benefits because they appear environmentally conscious. However, because requirements vary from program to program and not all programs are monitored, it's difficult to determine exactly what a firm participating in a program is actually doing to limit its environmental impact. Darnall and Carmin's plan hopes to change that.

"Right now there's a pooling effect taking place in that we tend to think about these programs collectively," Darnall says. "We make no distinction between the less rigorous

-more-

programs and the ones that are more likely to achieve significant environmental improvements. What we're looking for in creating a classification system is a separating effect where we can categorize programs by their internal requirements and probabilities for greater environmental improvements."

Darnall and Carmin propose that voluntary environmental programs be classified into one of four levels of environmental commitment:

- **Information, Assistance and Awareness Programs** provide technical or educational assistance to ensure that participants are familiar with environmental regulations and emerging industry practices.
- **Environmental Pledge Programs** require firms to make an internal commitment to enhancing their environmental performance through a goal or value statement, a signed agreement, or the creation of performance targets.
- **Voluntary Reporting Programs** require participants to submit a self-initiated report of their environmental progress to program administrators.
- **Performance Monitoring Programs** stipulate that participants' environmental activities be monitored by a third party, which could include sanctions if program requirements are not met.

Darnall and Carmin's plan also calls for each voluntary environmental program to be certified in that level of commitment. The researchers surveyed administrators of programs operating in the United States and then developed the classification system based on patterns in the data related to how voluntary environmental programs were designed, organized and structured.

"More than 100 voluntary programs exist in the United States, and each measures environmental performance on different dimensions," Darnall says. "In studying these programs' potential for environmental improvements, we approached the question differently by evaluating how the population of programs were designed. If we can understand how the programs are constructed, we will be better able to understand if they are likely to achieve standard performance."

Darnall and Carmin hope their proposal can provide a foundation and a possible framework for a classification system that could be implemented, and eliminate some of the mystery surrounding voluntary programs and their impact on the environment.

"That's what we hope," Darnall says. "The Environmental Protection Agency is concerned about its programs and is seeking to develop a classification system. They have convened a working group of voluntary environmental program managers to address this very issue, so the results of our study are timely."