

Can “Works with WELL” Make Product Selection Easier?

With a new program, the International WELL Building Institute aims to help users more easily find high-performance building products and systems.

by Elizabeth Waters

Product and material selection is one of the most time-consuming parts of achieving a green and healthy building certification like LEED, WELL, or (perhaps most famously) the Living Building Challenge. Project teams must sort through hundreds of products to find safer cleaning solutions, low-VOC furniture, or air purifiers that meet performance criteria. “Works with WELL,” a new program launched in November 2023 by the International WELL Building Institute (IWBI), could help project teams pursuing WELL certification sort through this clutter.

According to an email exchange with Jessica Cooper, chief product officer at IWBI, the organization has seen an increasing demand from WELL users for help identifying products that are compatible with the standard. “The professionals working on implementing WELL often turn to IWBI to understand which organizations offer products and services that support the achievement of specific WELL features,” she explained. And “manufacturers, including many IWBI members, are interested in validating how their products can contribute to WELL, and support health and well-being more broadly.”

Works with WELL aims to bridge this gap by giving manufacturers a way to verify that their products and services align with WELL requirements and providing users access to a directory of these verified products and services. IWBI hopes this will streamline the material selection, documentation, and ver-



Image: International WELL Building Institute

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ification processes for project teams.

Products must “substantially contribute”

The WELL Building Standard, now in its second version, consists of ten concepts—from Air and Materials to Nourishment and Mind—that promote the various dimensions of occupant and community health and well-being. Each concept contains a set of features,

both preconditions (requirements, like LEED's prerequisites) and optimizations (the equivalent of optional credits in LEED), that projects pursue to earn certification. The standard has more than 100 features, many of which contain multiple parts, with specific health intentions. IWBI updates and adds new features as knowledge of healthy building practices evolves.

The Works with WELL mark applies to products or services that are directly called for by a feature part and that "substantially contribute" to a project's ability to achieve it, explained Cooper.

"Products developed by early [Works with WELL] adopters offer solutions for air and water quality, lighting, smart building technologies, flooring, wall coverings, furnishing, and biophilic products, as well as solutions that promote mental health, movement, nourishment, and community engagement and more," according to a [press release](#).

For instance, purchasing standing desks for employees in an office, or instituting a workplace wellness program, might help a project team achieve certain features within the Movement concept. In these cases, a Works with WELL mark might be awarded to qualifying sit-stand desks or to a wellness technology platform that facilitates movement.

In another example, IWBI awarded a Works with WELL mark to a hydroponic micro-farm that helps satisfy requirements for multiple features related to healthy food advertising, biophilic design, and access to nature and fresh food—though the food itself is not eligible.

It is worth noting that there could be trade-offs between multiple impact categories for a single product. For example, a workstation component might align with requirements for ergonomics but not with requirements for VOC restrictions. IWBI does not plan to screen products for their alignment with features

beyond those they directly support, so users will be responsible for considering whether a product that "works with" one feature could adversely affect another.

A "license," not a certification or endorsement

IWBI makes clear that a Works with WELL mark is not an endorsement of specific products or a guarantee that, by using them, a project team will achieve the related feature. WELL certification is performance based, and IWBI will still review project performance. For example, installing a Works with WELL-verified portable air purification unit doesn't guarantee that a project will achieve the requisite IAQ test results.

And neither is Works with WELL a new product certification, Cooper emphasized. IWBI will not be testing products. In fact, third-party certifications are a good way to comply with Works with WELL. For example, Cooper said, the WELL feature on material ingredient optimization "requires that the project implement products certified by Cradle to Cradle, [the] Living Product Challenge, or [a] Global GreenTag Product Health Declaration. If a manufacturer successfully provides documentation of achievement of any of the listed programs, the product will be eligible for the Works with WELL mark."

While this alignment could make project teams' jobs easier, it might not be as attractive to manufacturers already investing in sustainable product development and paying fees related to third-party certification.

Companies must apply separately for each product group to receive a Works with WELL mark, but manufacturers may answer questions differently for separate SKUs within a product group, thus allowing for variations in compatibility between similar products. Applicants must support their answers with

publicly available documentation, such as:

- product spec sheets
- laws or regulations to which the product adheres
- third-party certifications or reports

A third party (whose name IWBI has not made public) will conduct the review and verification process. Once awarded the license, manufacturers will need to reapply annually.

How does the directory work?

As of late September 2023, (the latest date for which IWBI provided data), more than 40 companies had enrolled more than 1,000 products in Works with WELL. The organization expects the number of products in the directory to grow as the program gains traction. Currently, wrote Cooper, IWBI has identified 69 product types compatible with one or more feature requirements. IWBI defines product types using the Construction Specifications Institute's (CSI) MasterFormat standard:

- Communications
- Electrical
- Equipment
- Finishes
- Furnishings
- HVAC
- Openings
- Plumbing
- Software Platforms
- Specialties

Once a user selects the relevant product type in the directory, they can search by product name, category, or company. For example, IWBI coded the micro-farm as equipment. In the equipment section, users can search the farm by its product name (Galleri Micro-farm), its category (hydroponic growing systems), or its

manufacturer (Babylon Micro-farms). This categorization system may not be intuitive for those outside the building industry, but the directory is user friendly.

IWBI will likely add product types as WELL features change in new versions. Cooper encourages manufacturers to propose new ways in which products might be compatible with WELL requirements.

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