



# Answering the Call: NSF P391 Answers the Call for Certification of Sustainable Service Providers

*presented by NSF Sustainability*

In an effort to embrace social responsibility, enhance working environments and increase ROI, many businesses in the public and private sectors today undertake initiatives to, among other things, improve building operations, reduce their carbon footprint and institute the use of more recycled materials. These businesses are aided by a marketplace of products readily identified by their sustainable attributes, a growing number of which carry some form of third-party certification.

While the standardization of sustainable products has been a reasonably uncomplicated process, the same cannot be said of so-called “sustainable services.” One major problem has been a lack of accurate and reliable information to evaluate a service’s sustainable characteristics. Comparing one sustainability-focused service provider with another often comes down to judging a single attribute – “apples to apples” – such as energy efficiency or impact on human health. But this obviously does not tell the whole story.

NSF International, an independent global organization that writes public health and environmental standards for the food, water and consumer goods industries, now certifies sustainable service providers in a variety of industries to North America’s first multi-attribute sustainability assessment protocol.

## **NSF P391: General Sustainability Assessment Criteria for Services and Service Providers**

NSF P391 enables those certified to the protocol to differentiate their services and pursue preferred vendor status with companies and organizations seeking more sustainable operating solutions. This includes local, state and federal government agencies and others attempting to comply with U.S. Executive Order 13514. Environmental consulting firms, building contractors, engineering firms, maintenance contractors and installation companies are among the many service providers eligible to earn NSF P391 certification.

Developed through **NSF’s National Center for Sustainability Standards (NCSS)**, the NSF P391 protocol was created using a consensus-based process that drew input from a panel of experts including service providers, suppliers, regulatory

agencies, environmental organizations and end users. NSF uses a similar process for developing American National Standards for products in a wide range of categories including chemicals, commercial furnishings, flooring, building products and materials, and water treatment and distribution systems.

The **NSF Sustainability** division provides certification to the NSF P391 protocol, helping companies develop standardized, objective methods for measuring sustainability. A fundamental goal of service certification is to inspire marketplace confidence and encourage the development of more sustainable products and services.

## **How the Certification Works**

NSF P391 is based on life-cycle assessment principles. The protocol uses a fundamental checklist to evaluate service providers against established prerequisite requirements, performance criteria and quantifiable metrics in three key areas:

- Environment
- Labor
- Social Responsibility

The simplified life-cycle assessment approach considers factors including energy and materials use, products used or supplied as part of the service; service processes and activities; service locations; equipment use; packaging; recycling and disposal of wastes; and worker and customer exposure to hazardous materials. Other aspects of a services organization’s operations and management, including ethical business practices, community and stakeholder engagement and general issues of corporate governance, are also included in the sustainability criteria.

Service providers can earn NSF P391 certification at the Conformant, Silver, Gold or Platinum level. Those achieving certification are authorized to use the NSF Sustainability Certified Mark in their advertising and marketing. This distinction clearly communicates the service provider’s expertise to government agencies and prospective customers. Monitoring and periodic reevaluation are required to maintain P391 certification.



## Guiding Principles

In order to apply the sustainability criteria to a broad range of service providers, the NSF P391 Protocol is guided in sound principles, specifically:

**Ease of use.** Sustainability criteria are meant to be easy to understand and apply, by both the service organizations and the personnel responsible for securing the services.

**Transparency.** The criteria and related assessment methods should be understood by, and available to all parties involved, while protecting confidential or sensitive business (or agency) information. NSF P391 is a voluntary protocol that emphasizes disclosure of information on both the impacts and the benefits of the service provided from an environmental and sustainability perspective.

**Neutrality.** The criteria and associated assessment process are not designed to favor specific industries, sectors, organizations or geographic regions.

**Leveraging existing processes.** Wherever possible, the criteria and assessment methods utilize, are consistent with, and build upon pertinent existing programs and practices. This includes ISO 14001 and various greenhouse gas (GHG) reporting initiatives. Protocol criteria are selected and developed based on sound scientific and engineering principles in order to produce accurate, reproducible results.

**Continuous improvement.** The criteria can also serve as a roadmap for service organizations just starting their sustainability journey, in addition to setting expectations for larger organizations with established programs. It is expected that the criteria will evolve over time as the sustainability field matures, as more innovation occurs, and as organizations gain more experience from applying sustainability principles to their business practices.

**Use by small, medium and large organizations.** The sustainability criteria articulated by NSF P391 are designed to be appropriate for wide variety of service providers, including a broad range of small businesses. Consequently, defining the appropriate level of detail and specificity was a primary consideration in establishing the criteria.

## Credibility and Confidence

As the first protocol designed to help define what constitutes sustainable services, NSF P391 offers service organizations the opportunity to review their internal practices, improve efficiencies and achieve preferred status within their target markets. By earning certification in this specialized area through standardized, objective methods, service providers that carry the NSF Sustainability Certified Mark can be viewed as credible, legitimate specialists in sustainable services.

Not coincidentally, the P391 Protocol also serves to inspire market confidence in the growing field of sustainable services by encouraging the greater acceptance of sustainably focused products and services.

For more information about certification to NSF P391 please contact NSF at (734) 476-2543, internationally at 00+1 (734) 476-2543 or by e-mail at [sustainability@nsf.org](mailto:sustainability@nsf.org).



## About NSF International



NSF International has been testing and certifying products for safety, health and the environment for more than 65 years ([www.nsf.org](http://www.nsf.org)). As an independent organization, NSF's mission is to protect public health and the environment through standards development, inspection, management systems auditing, testing and certification for industries including food, water, building materials, retail, chemicals, automotive, aerospace, consumer products and health sciences. Operating in more than 120 countries, NSF is committed to protecting public health worldwide.

NSF Sustainability draws upon this expertise in standards development, product assurance and certification, advisory services and management systems to help companies green their products, operations, systems and supply chains. NSF, through the National Center for Sustainability Standards, has developed sustainability standards and protocols for green chemicals, building products and materials and service providers. NSF works with leading regulators, scientists, engineers, public health and environmental health professionals and industry representatives to develop these transparent, consensus-based standards and protocols.