

Things Are Looking Much Brighter ...

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is expected to publish minimum standards for retained reflectivity on traffic signs sometime before the end of 2007. Given this, and the fact that 3M, the largest reflective sheeting manufacturer in the world, will no longer be producing Engineer Grade reflective sheeting for traffic signs as of 2008, we have received numerous questions from our customers concerning these changes. We sat down with Henry Ross, USA-SIGN Sales & Marketing Director, and asked him to help clarify what these upcoming changes mean to our customers and end-users.

Q. Henry, in addition to your position at USA-SIGN, you're also the President-Elect of the American Traffic Safety Services Association (ATSSA), and you've been associated with the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, advising the FHWA. So you're intimately familiar with these issues. Can you give us some history?

A. I can tell you that this is not a new concern. ATSSA has been advocating minimum reflectivity levels since at least 1991; they were first formally proposed in 1993, and were subsequently modified in 1998, and again in 2003.

Q. So there are current requirements for minimum levels of reflectivity already in place?

A. Well, yes and no. Typically, states have minimum specifications for newly manufactured signs, but the new proposed minimums involve *retained* reflectivity, meaning the sheeting will be expected to *retain* a predetermined level of reflectivity throughout the useful life of the sign. In other words, when a sign no longer meets the minimum level of reflectivity for that particular sign type, it will have reached the end of its useful life, and will have to be replaced.

Q. When these new requirements are published, what will happen? How will these changes be implemented?

A. The new standards will almost certainly be added to the FHWA's *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD)*; then individual states will either adopt the *MUTCD* in whole, or modify their own state supplement or manual. Any change by a state will have to be at least as stringent as the requirements in the Federal *MUTCD*. This means that ultimately, all state and Federal specifications will require sheetings with greater retained reflectivity.

Q. Will our customers be able to continue using the same types of reflective signs that they have in the past?

A. Well, that depends on the type of sign and the type of sheeting currently being used. States and municipalities currently using reflective sheeting that will, over the expected life of the sign, yield performance levels equal to or greater than the expected new minimums won't have to make any change. But today many signs are still being made with Type I sheeting [commonly referred to as "engineer grade", as referenced in *ASTM Specification D4956-04*]. In a worst case scenario many or possibly most old signs will be inadequate under the proposed rules, either because the sheeting isn't bright enough when new, or

because it is incapable of retaining its brightness over time. Certain sign types, such as parking signs, tourist information signs, and some guide signs may be excluded from the new requirements.

Q. When purchasing new signs, how can our customers ensure they will be compliant with the proposed rules?

A. I want to be clear that, prior to the FHWA publishing the Final Rule on this matter (which is expected before 2008), there is no definitive way to know precisely what the minimum standards will be. However, after carefully studying the FHWA's *Notice of Proposed Amendment*, we are recommending that all engineer grade signs, except white-on-green guide signs, be manufactured using Type III sheeting [*ASTM Specification D4956-04*], beginning immediately. Type III sheeting provides superior brightness, more favorable life-cycle costs, and enhanced warranties, and will meet the new minimum requirements where engineer grade was formerly required.

Q. 3M has announced its plans to discontinue engineer grade sheeting for traffic signs. What should we tell customers who want to continue to purchasing engineer grade signs?

A. It is true that 3M, a major manufacturer of reflective sheeting, has announced that they no longer intend to "produce engineer grade sheeting for use on traffic signs in the United States." 3M has no doubt done this in part because engineer grade won't meet the FHWA's proposed new minimum levels of retained reflectivity. However, it is also likely that some signs will be excluded from the new requirements when the FHWA issues its Final Rule, and there are other sources for engineer grade sheeting. So, if the market continues to demand engineer grade for those specifically excluded signs, that demand can be met.

Q. Henry, thanks very much for your insights. Any final thoughts you'd like to share with our readers?

A. I just want to add that USA-SIGN applauds the FHWA, state DOTs, and the independent industry research organizations (like ATSSA) that helped develop these proposed new standards. A range of factors were considered, including technological improvements in vehicle and headlight design, and advancements in reflective sheeting technology. These new minimums will make our signs much brighter and easier to read, and ultimately make our roads much safer.