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## Wal-Mart could be a 'green' giant

By **Marjorie Cortez**

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Life lessons come in some unexpected places sometimes.

A few weeks back, some Wal-Mart execs paid a visit to our editorial board. Since I can count the times I've shopped in a Wal-Mart store on one hand, I approached the meeting with great skepticism.

I'm troubled by how Wal-Mart has transformed the landscape of many small towns in America, some for the worse. After many years of postponing the inevitable, a Wal-Mart is slated to open a store in my hometown in northwestern Colorado.

Then there was the lawsuit alleging that at some Wal-Mart stores janitorial crews — many of them comprising illegal immigrants — had been locked into stores during their shifts. According to an Associated Press report, Wal-Mart officials said the stores were locked down to protect employees and keep merchandise secure. A manager with a key was always on site, the report said.

There's also the matter of Wal-Mart's size. Its size enables it to sell products cheaply, which is good news for consumers. Its size also enables it to control markets for certain products worldwide.

On the other hand, Wal-Mart's corporate heft also means that it is capable of forcing suppliers and nudging an awful lot of consumers to adopt "green" habits.

Take light bulbs. Wal-Mart has made a concerted effort to push compact fluorescent light bulbs or CFLs. They cost more but they use at least two-thirds less energy and last up to 10 times longer. They generate 70 percent less heat.

All of that made perfect sense to me in an abstract way, but the light bulb in my brain, as it were, didn't come on until I heard Sarah Wright, executive director of the nonprofit Utah Clean Energy, speak at Christ United Methodist Church on Sunday.

If every household in America would replace five traditional light bulbs with five CFLs, the energy savings would be the equivalent of the output of 21 power plants, Wright explained. That's huge as we consider our vulnerability to world energy markets and the environmental impacts of coal-fired power plants.

I don't know about your household, but we use at least five light bulbs in our living room alone. Imagine the impact if every household switched out every bulb.

In that moment, Wal-Mart seemed less the corporate ogre than a force capable of stimulating profound environmental changes. If Wal-Mart acts as the big fish in the pro-environment pond, there's a good likelihood that others will have to follow suit. Imagine the possibilities.

Recently, Wal-Mart announced an initiative to reduce product packaging. It's a winner all the way around. Manufacturers save money on packaging materials and shipping costs. Streamlined products mean more efficient use of shipping containers and trucks. There's less waste on the consumer end of things.

According to a USA Today report, toy-maker Kid Connection estimates that it saved \$2.4 million a year in shipping costs, 3,800 trees and 1 million barrels of oil when it cut excess packaging on its private label line of toys.

But because Wal-Mart is Wal-Mart, there are groups that question whether Wal-Mart is sincere in embracing green ways or if it's all an attempt to boost its public image.

It's probably both. I think Wal-Mart is actively seeking ways it can be more environmentally sensitive and improve its bottom line. It's capitalism at its best.

I keep thinking of the multiplier effect of using compact fluorescent light bulbs. When companies come up with smaller packaging, less packaging and recyclable packaging for Wal-Mart, doesn't it follow that they will sell the same products to your non-Wal-Mart neighborhood grocer? Those savings will transcend to shippers, grocers and consumers.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not so bowled over that I've changed my shopping habits. If I'm genuinely interested in doing the "green" thing, it doesn't make sense to burn a lot of motor fuel just to shop at Wal-Mart since there isn't one near my house.

But I must admit, they're doing a lot of things that make good environmental sense. And in

typical Wal-Mart fashion, they're doing it in a big way.

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*Marjorie Cortez, whose home recycling efforts nearly give her a hernia every time she rolls her bin to the curb, is a Deseret Morning News editorial writer. E-mail: [marjorie@desnews.com](mailto:marjorie@desnews.com)*

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