

Made of steel

Ensuring accurate and reliable green steel labels

August 2026

Iron and steel production is responsible for around 7% of global CO₂ emissions – with crude steel production still largely relying on the most polluting methods based on coal. To meet the demand for more sustainable products, companies around the world increasingly market their steel products as ‘sustainable’ – using labels such as blue, green, eco, zero, or even carbon neutral – often without taking any real action.

This is possible because a clear definition of green steel is lacking, which creates confusion for what counts as green steel. Without a clear and ambitious definition, steel manufacturers will keep stealing green attributions from innovative producers that are really making a change in their production methods.

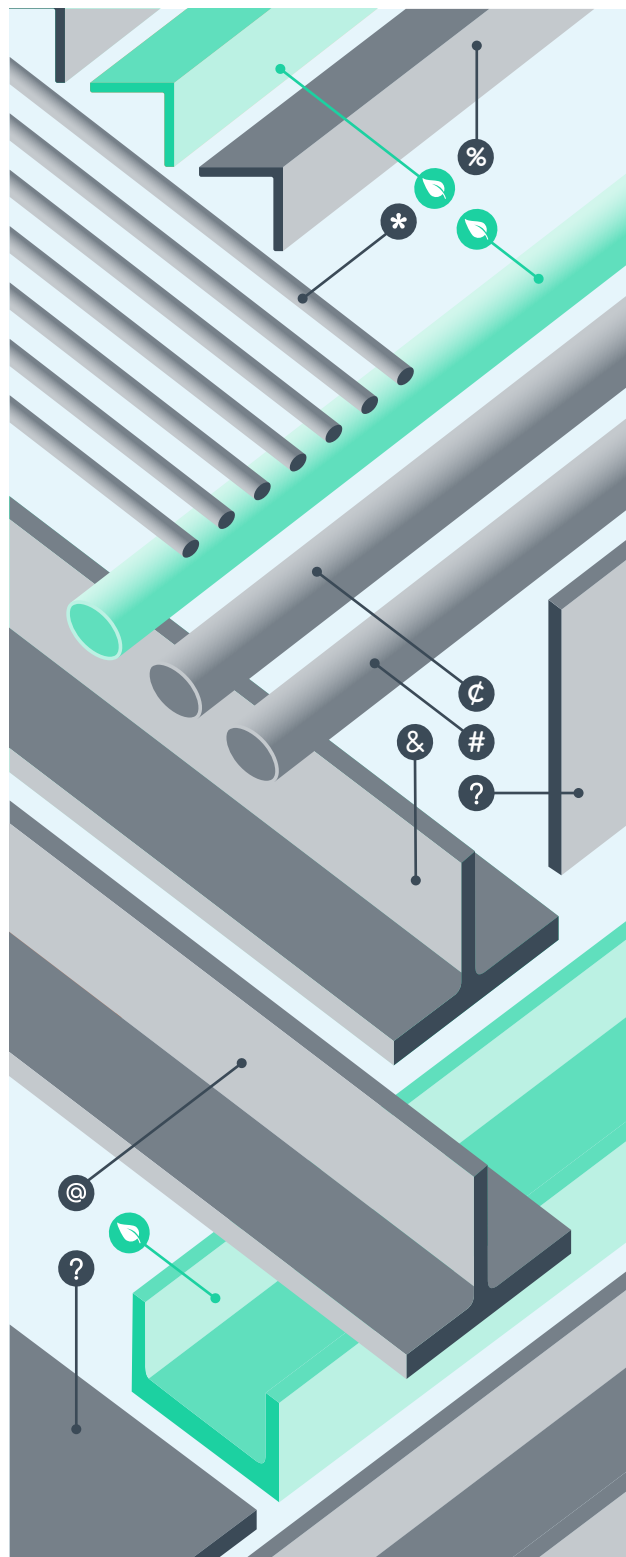
Decarbonising steel must be a global priority – and accurate labels relying on a common definition are an essential first step. Labels can inform consumers about a product’s climate impacts and drive innovation to reduce emissions, so it is important we get them right as they are made mandatory.

Read on to learn more about how ‘green’ steel claims can falsely inflate environmental credentials, and how to ensure reliable and accurate steel labels instead.

What are steel labels?

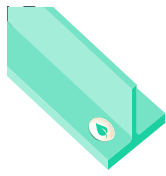
Labels are a tool to disclose information about a product’s characteristics, such as their environmental performance. This allows consumers to differentiate products on the market, enabling more sustainable purchasing and investment decisions.

So far, three different types of labels for green steel have surfaced. These can be differentiated based on the promoters: public authorities, a group of organisations, or private companies. Ideally, the most ambitious labels can automatically push less ambitious ones out of the market – but the danger is also that less ambitious proposals and deceptive methodologies trickle down into public labels and become law.



The most ambitious steel label should rule them all

Legally binding



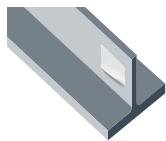
What: This label should be the most ambitious. Information requirements imposed by (product) legislation for all market actors.

Nature: Mandatory and driven by public authorities

Example: The Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA) could impose mandatory information requirements for all steel products but will likely delegate this to the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) and Construction Products Regulations (CPR).

Note: Product policies must be aligned with climate goals. Labelling systems tend to focus on what is on (or is expected to be on) the market, while climate goals are built around what is needed to respect planetary boundaries.

Private (collective) labels



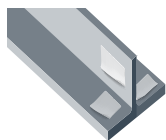
What: Subset of private actors, such as steel associations) developing a joint label for defining green steel. These can be developed with public actors and/or civil society.

Nature: Voluntary

Example: A green steel label developed in a specific context through a collective effort of the main steel associations and its key members.

Note: There are already a handful of competing collective labels. The most well-known are Responsible Steel, Low-Emission Steel Standard, and Global Steel Climate Council.

Private (company) labels



What: A company develops a specific label to market one or more products.

Nature: Voluntary

Example: Major steel companies have one or more labels to market their products as green, blue, eco, or fossil free.

Note: There is already a wide range of private company labels.

Ensuring green steel labels cast real change – ECOS recommendations

For steel and beyond, ECOS wants labels defining what green is to:



Reward best performers and push the worst technologies off the market.

It is important that any label truly incentivises operators to achieve maximum emission reductions, while disincentivising the most polluting technologies from being sold. Only by providing reliable and trustworthy information can pressure be effectively leveraged to push the green steel transition forward, from both ends.



Maintain the physical connection between claim and product.

Certain accounting methodologies allow for the allocation and aggregation of emissions savings to be attributed to products that are produced in very polluting ways. These methodologies, such as book and claim for upstream supply of materials and energy procurement, should by no means be equated to real deep decarbonisation efforts.



Support decarbonisation and better circularity simultaneously.

Circularity is an important means to decarbonise steelmaking; it should be fully leveraged to the maximum extent possible.

Common tactics to steal the green

Private company labels – and their underlying methodologies – are crucial for understanding wider discussions on the labelling of steel. We analysed all major private company green steel labels and find that green steel claims have proliferated globally over the past decade. These claims are often unsubstantiated, untransparent, or even simply inaccurate. Without taking real and urgent action, the steel industry is in stark contrast with what is needed to reach global climate commitments.

Unfortunately, contrasting definitions adopted by companies on what is green steel make it easy for them to use marketing and methodological tricks to label their steel as green. While certain steelmakers are changing their production methods to decarbonise deeply, others continue to pollute-as-usual using some, or a combination of, the dubious techniques below.

	Tactic	Issue
	Minimal CO2 emissions reductions in the most polluting route	By labelling marginal improvements as green, the practice becomes an incentive to extend the lifetime of emissive production routes, locking in unavoidable emissions.
	Unclear quantification of results and minimal data	How emissions are quantified is often not disclosed, and when it is, the information is minimal. Some companies disclose essential data, such as what 'green' label and the emissions saved, but most do not even do that.
	Limited publicly available data of processes	It is challenging to scrutinise the claims of emissions avoided. Information is scattered across different websites and precise information on the process (which technology was used, baseline reference, time, location) is often lacking to substantiate the relevant claim.
	Privately held internal credit banks that limit public scrutiny	Companies generally hold an internal credit system to keep track of emissions savings. Few publicly disclose the number of credits generated by those savings and some only disclose the methodology adopted to customers. Tracking the right allocation of these credits across sold products is up to each company's accounting accuracy with little possibility for public scrutiny.
	Limited verification by third parties	Not all green products are verified or certified. This leaves the door open to greenwashing.



Want to learn more about how the different forms of mass balance are connected to steel products and global trade? Take a look at our [factsheet](#).

This factsheet has benefited from the valuable input of Just Shift Finland.

The data behind this factsheet is available upon request by writing to thomas.trevisan@ecostandard.org