Firms set up green group

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A core group of seven law firms will subject their sustainability programs to scrutiny and develop benchmarks to help the broader profession reduce its impact on the environment.

A new sustainability group, the Australian Legal Sector Alliance (AusLSA), has signed up seven founding members that will collectively devise tools needed to reduce waste, energy consumption, the use of paper, freight, and transport ranging from taxis to planes.

The seven firms are: Clayton Utz, DLA Phillips Fox, Henry Davis York, Maddocks, Mallesons Stephen Jaques, Norton Rose and Swaab Attorneys.

AusLSA project manager Emily Wilson says one of the founding members joined after missing out on winning a tender with a government client because it lacked an adequate sustainability program. "The market is starting to demand that firms have credibility when it comes to sustainability practices," she says.

Australian firms are addressing sustainability in an ad hoc way that lacks objectivity and

what a law firm should aspire to.

The program offers training courses to lawyers and advice on how to institute and monitor sustainability programs. Although firms may have less impact on the environment than other industries, Szydzik says it is important that they reduce their ecological footprint and assess their "cultural footprint".

The position that they take on important community issues does carry significant weight," she says. The alliance is based on a group in the UK that has signed up about 200 member firms since it began in 2007. Sixty per cent of those UK firms now carry out regular "carbon footprinting" and have demonstrated annual improvements on carbon emissions, Wilson says.

Other groups already assess sustainability using broader all-industry benchmarks. The St James Ethics Centre runs a corporate responsibility index (CRI), which Henry Davis York is alone in the profession in taking part in.

The CRI includes a survey of businesses on their sustainability practices, which is then assessed by an independent auditor.