Companies that adopt the environmental management system ISO 14000, designed to help reduce businesses’ environmental impacts, generally back this up with sincere investment in environmentally-friendly practices, research suggests. Researchers found that adoption of the ISO 14000 was not ‘greenwash’, but reflected a move towards more sustainable practices in both European and North American companies.

Environmental management systems, such as ISO 14000 and the EU’s EMAS1, provide a holistic approach towards reducing environmental impact, and the number of companies that are using these systems has increased rapidly in recent years. However, it has been suggested that companies may use environmental management systems as greenwash. In other words, companies might adopt such systems purely as a marketing tool, hoping to win over consumers and stakeholders without having to invest in underlying green practices.

In particular, and in conjunction with previous research, it has been proposed that North American companies are more likely to be using ISO 14000 as greenwash than European companies. In this study, researchers set out to investigate the motivations for adopting the ISO 14000 and to investigate whether these differed between European and North American companies.

The researchers used data from the Global Manufacturing Research Group, a multinational body that conducts surveys that are standardised and refined by experts. The surveys were sent to 231 companies in three North American countries (Canada, Mexico and the United States) and 370 companies in seven western European countries (Austria, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland), between 2006 and 2009.

Plant managers were asked to rank how far the company had gone towards implementing ISO 14000 and then asked how much investment there was in ‘environmental supply chain management’ (ESCM), for example, in pollution reduction, recycling and waste reduction measures. The researchers then used investment in ESCM to reflect the true intentions behind the company’s environmental strategy.

The results show that companies that had made more effort to implement the ISO 14000 did invest more in ESCM. Although this does not mean that environmental management systems are never used as greenwash, it does suggest that, overall, ISO 14000 does lead to genuine environmentally-friendly investment.

Furthermore, there was no difference in either levels of adoption of ISO 14000 or investment in ESCM between western European and North American companies. The study concludes that this research does not support claims that North American companies are more likely to use the ISO 14000 purely as a marketing tool.

Overall, the results indicate that the ISO 14000 is a worthwhile system that does lead to increased investment in reducing companies’ environmental impact. The authors of this study call for this research to be expanded to include other European countries and across Asia. They also caution that this study only measured investment, and suggest that research is needed into how much environmental impacts are actually reduced.