



GOING GREEN



State is first in eco-friendly building codes

By [Mike Lee](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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K.C. Alfred / UNION-TRIBUNE

Al Aguilar put together solar tubes at DPR Construction's San Diego building, which it recently purchased and is renovating.

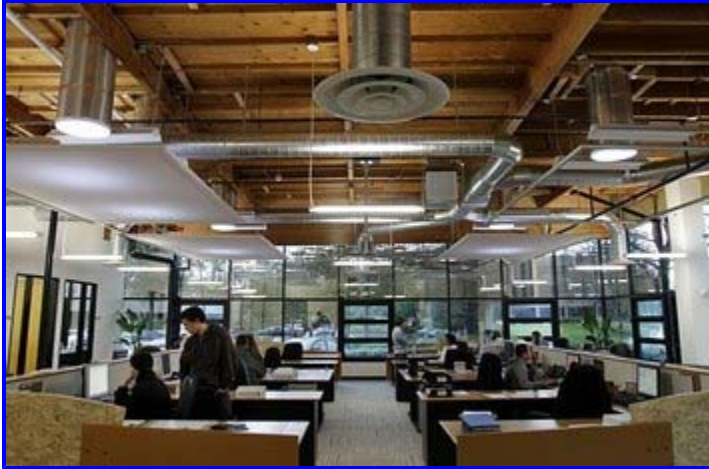


Photo by K.C. Alfred

DPR Construction in San Diego bought a UTC building and is in the process of remodeling it in an environmentally friendly way. Large solar tubes are part of the additions.

CALGREEN

California's new building standards mandate various eco-friendly measures starting in 2011, including:

- A 20 percent reduction in indoor water use.
- Separate water meters for indoor and outdoor water use in nonresidential buildings.
- Installation of moisture-sensing irrigation systems for larger landscape projects.
- Diversion of at least 50 percent of construction waste from landfills.
- Inspections of furnaces, air conditioners and mechanical equipment in some nonresidential buildings to ensure they are at maximum efficiency.
- Use of low-pollutant paints, carpet, vinyl flooring and other materials.

Even as the construction business continues to struggle, San Diego contractor Russ Earnshaw is embracing a landmark set of environmental codes in California that will raise the cost of new buildings, create more government oversight and increase industry competition once green practices become the norm.

“The minimum standard has been raised for the entire state,” Earnshaw said. “There is a great long-term benefit because we have to build structures that are longer-lasting and more efficient and just overall better for the environment.”

About 40 percent of the country's energy is used to run offices, homes, restaurants and other buildings, making green construction a centerpiece of state and national programs to lower emissions of climate-warming gases by reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

Developers, environmentalists and regulators debated for more than two years before the California Building Standards Commission adopted the nation's first comprehensive mandate on eco-friendly construction last month. Builders said the rules are a reasonable compromise that won't hurt an already crippled industry. Environmentalists said the threshold has been set too low.

It could take years for the policy to make a significant difference because the state's 13 million existing housing units are exempt from it, and because it could take a while for construction to return to pre-recession levels.

Called Calgreen codes, the regulations will take effect Jan. 1. But some builders are considering whether to retool their operations now, while business is slow.

Calgreen covers dozens of actions, from managing storm-water runoff and installing low-polluting fireplaces to recycling construction debris and using building materials that release fewer chemicals. The main categories include structural design, energy consumption, water conservation and pollution control.

Previously, builders navigated through piecemeal state and local requirements for energy efficiency, the handling of construction waste and other environmental elements. They also could make voluntary efforts, including the pursuit of LEED certification, a process created by the U.S. Green Building Council. LEED designation is popular for some commercial projects and even required for certain municipal sites for San Diego and other governments.

Construction experts said the eco-friendly trend hasn't gained as much traction in San Diego County as it has in the San Francisco Bay Area and other places known for environmentalism.

"It's going to force the architects and the service providers to get good at green building," said Jim Simcoe, a green-building consultant in Encinitas. "You can't skirt the issue anymore."

Leaders of the state's conventional building industry support Calgreen, saying it's a fair-minded benchmark. But they're concerned that future additions could become too costly.

They praised regulators for not forcing developers to seek third-party certification of their work, which can be expensive.

"We are mainstreaming green building," said Robert Raymer, senior engineer for the California Building Industry Association in Sacramento.

He expects other states to follow, but said California has a big lead.

"I doubt you will see the rest of the country get close to California in the next 10 years on water conservation and energy conservation," he said.

Raymer pegged the cost of compliance at about \$1,500 per home.

Any premium tied to environmental measures should fall over time, said Zach Pannier, an engineer for DPR Construction and president of the U.S. Green Building Council's chapter in San Diego. "There really is no additional cost for doing a lot of those things if they are done from the beginning," he said.

Other developers emphasized Calgreen's potential for spurring innovation among suppliers and

generating greater demand for green building materials.

“New products and ideas come out every day,” Earnshaw said. “The sky is the limit.”

Environmental groups are mixed about Calgreen. They cheered the introduction of statewide standards, but said the codes are too limited and may not be enforced uniformly.

“So many local building officials and planning departments across the state don’t have the resources to work with builders on compliance,” said Jim Metropulos, a senior official with the Sierra Club in Sacramento.

In particular, he said the new rules don’t go far enough in boosting rain collection, the use of recycled water and other conservation strategies.

Building regulators in San Diego County said it’s too soon to say how they will enforce the revamped standards and how big of a load it will be on their staffs. The inspectors said they’re still digesting roughly 200 pages of state code and will use the rest of the year to prepare for their new duties.

“I don’t see that it will be a huge change,” said Clay Westling, a senior structural engineer for the county of San Diego.

Opinions are split on how Calgreen compares to voluntary rating systems such as LEED. The programs have similar goals but different approaches; for instance, LEED allows developers to choose from a menu of options to earn however many points they’re seeking. Calgreen has a mix of mandates and electives.

Several construction experts and state officials said they haven’t done a point-by-point analysis.

“It’s not apples to apples,” said David Walls, executive director of the California Building Standards Commission. “We require things that are not even part of LEED.”

Pannier described Calgreen as the “floor” and said LEED leaders would “continue pushing the ceiling for what things really can be.”

But Pannier doesn’t dismiss the state’s efforts. “Any step forward is a good step,” he said.

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