

The Sensible Environmentalist

(NAPS)—DEAR DR. MOORE:

Are there green building guidelines available for someone building or renovating a home?



Dr. Moore

That's a timely question. Although green building has gained popularity, there has been a lack of widely accepted guidelines for home builders. What we've seen are local efforts, created to address specific local needs or adapted from commercial construction. But that's about to change.

The U.S. National Association of Home Builders is developing green building guidelines exclusively for residential builders. One goal is to eliminate confusion. For example, some programs focus on environmental impact while others include social factors, such as whether a project provides local employment. Even more important is the fact that some programs fail to consider the impact of a building material over its entire life cycle—which I believe is crucial. Through consultation with environmentalists, industries, builders and others, the new guideline is expected to be comprehensive but user-friendly.

In the meantime, the following principles can serve as a guide to green building:

1. Use renewable materials and energy where possible.

The fact that nine out of 10 homes in North America are framed with wood means that people are well on their way to building green, since wood is the only major building material that's renewable. With respect to energy for heating and lights, consumers

in some regions can also choose "green" energy produced by wind, hydro or biomass (usually wood waste). But the most environmentally friendly technology is the geothermal heat pump, which uses renewable earth energy from beneath the home to provide heat, air conditioning and hot water.

2. Be energy efficient.

This is a factor both in terms of energy used to power the home and the choice of building materials. Consumers should install a geothermal heat pump and Energy Star appliances, seal doors and windows, and use compact fluorescent light bulbs which consume less energy and last longer. In terms of materials, wood is a better insulator than steel or concrete—and a wood-framed house that is well insulated and sealed will stay naturally warmer in winter and cooler in summer, resulting in reduced energy consumption.

3. Minimize pollution.

This includes pollution caused during the manufacture of materials. For example, research has shown that wood products use less fossil fuels to make, produce less water and air pollution, and result in far lower emissions of greenhouse gases, than either steel or concrete.

Although the new guideline is on its way, I believe that a sensible environmentalist would consider materials and energy in terms of their overall life cycle impact, with special attention to renewable energy and materials.

Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder and former president of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions can be sent to Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.com.