

Saying a Product or Its Manufacturer is 'Green' Doesn't Necessarily Mean that it Is, in Reality, Environmentally Friendly

Green, as a color, isn't about to steamroll its way across the RV industry as a design element like it did the automotive field 20 years ago. Remember all those teal green Chevy Camaros cruising around town back in the late '80s?

As a contemporary philosophy, however, "green" is second only to "fuel efficiency" in its impact on what's built — and what's bought — in this day and age.

Unlike mileage statistics, however, it's a lot tougher trying to qualify just exactly what "green" means in real terms. With this thought in mind, I called the folks at Elkhart, Ind.-based TRA Certification Inc., a program marketed nationally by T.R. Arnold & Associates Inc., which also provides third-party evaluation in the manufactured- and modular-housing industry. TRA Certification evaluates RVs and RV-manufacturing plants in an effort to help reduce their environmental impact.

"There are 'green' programs for residential use — healthcare, homes, commercial buildings — but we realized that there wasn't anything like that for the RV industry," said Mandy Leazenby, TRA's green program manager. "So, we developed one."

With no industrywide consensus of just exactly what it means to be "green," TRA turned to the National Green Building Standard applied to single-family homes, and used it as a platform to implement applicable parts for the RV industry.

There are actually two steps to the evaluation process. Before TRA ever begins certification of the units, it first must certify the manufacturing plant itself. "We don't want to go into a company and ignore what's going on in the plant because they could be extremely wasteful, yet build a really great RV," Leazenby noted. "We need to ensure that the whole operation supports green initiatives."



TRA Certification Logo

For example, she cited the difference between a technician performing a test of a unit's water lines with a drain hose versus a plant utilizing a holding tank that recycles the water. "If I go into a plant and see an elevated water tank, I know it's being used and reused to test the water lines in their units. It might've been a pain to set up, but it makes a huge difference environmentally," said Leazenby, adding that it can also make a big difference in the company's water bills.

The RVs themselves are ranked in six different categories: resource efficiency (building design and materials), water efficiency, energy efficiency, indoor air quality (that, she notes, is where the 'F' word, formaldehyde, comes in), operation maintenance (the owner's manual) and innovative practices. The last category is something of a catch-all covering aspects not mentioned in the others, be it nitrogen-filled tires or LED lighting systems.

"We'll run the RV against our checklist and see how well it fares," said Leazenby. "A unit might receive a lot of points for energy efficiency but fall short in the other categories. Our green certification program provides them

with a goal."

Just as there are levels which need to be attained in order to gain green certification, there are additional plateaus within the certification process itself: bronze, silver, gold and emerald. Again, the levels are structured to provide manufacturers with attainable goals. For example, Elkhart-based RV builder Forest River Inc. recently pushed certification of its Class C motorhomes from silver to gold by replacing the faucets used in the coaches' bathrooms. By opting for a low-flow, one-gallon-per-minute faucet, the units improved their overall water efficiency — and bumped their point totals into gold territory.

While more and more manufacturers are opting into the program — a current list of green-certified RVs can be found at www.tragreen.com — the only two companies that have attained emerald status to date are Jayco Inc., for its Skylark travel trailer (although all of Jayco's units are green-certified at some level), and EverGreen Recreational Vehicles LLC's complete line.

"That's reflective of the company as a whole," she said of EverGreen's achievement. "'Green' has been an integral part of EverGreen's operations from the very beginning; it's part of their corporate culture. They know the market they are selling to is seeking that out and is willing to pay extra for it."

As Leazenby noted, building to green standards isn't unduly expensive, but if you're looking to go 'above and beyond,' there's a certain cost associated with it. "I think as far as consumers go, they are getting a little wiser," she added. "Third-party verification is becoming more important to them — not just for RVs, but with any consumer goods. Almost any company can make a claim to be green in some aspect of its operation or production, but that doesn't make you a green company or make your product green."