



What Does it Mean to be a 'Green' RV?

While there are no industry-wide accepted standards, several manufacturers are now touting their models as being environmentally-friendly, and TRA certification offers third-party verification of green manufacturing practices.

By **JOHN EGAN**

For RV makers, it's not easy being "green." For one thing, determining whether an RV is eco-friendly – most notably from a consumer's standpoint – remains a bit of a gray area. And then there's the issue of cost: For an RV manufacturer, going *green* can mean parting with more green, as in money.

Nonetheless, many RV manufacturers – whether they hold official *green* certification or not – are increasingly committed to eco-friendly initiatives, both big and small.

RV Dealers Association President Phil Ingrassia predicts that, going forward, money will be the biggest incentive for eco-

friendly building in the RV manufacturing business – either through cost savings or increased sales.

"In addition to efficiencies in certified *green* production practices, the advent of lighter units that help increase fuel efficiency will not only save energy, but can lead to a whole new segment of consumers entering the market," he says.

Since 2009, TRA Certification Inc. has labeled RVs and RV manufacturers as *green*. Mandy Leazenby, green program manager at TRA, says 12 RV manufacturers and more than 20 RV products carry TRA's *green* certification, which is awarded at four levels (from





lowest to highest): Bronze, Silver, Gold and Emerald.

Manufacturers that have earned TRA certification include Columbia Northwest, Cruiser RV, DRV RV, EverGreen RV, Forest River and Gulf Stream.

In the past four years, more than 200,000 RVs bearing TRA certification have been sold, according to Leazenby. The certification program is voluntary.

EverGreen Takes the Emerald Award

Founded in 2009, EverGreen RV reigns as the only Emerald-certified manufacturer of RVs. Mark Boessler, the company's president and COO, says all six of EverGreen's RV models – Ever-Lite, Sun Valley, i-Go, Element, Ascend and Bay Hill – qualify as *green*. Two more EverGreen brands will be unveiled in September, he says.

EverGreen RV has been designated by TRA Certification as an Emerald Award manufacturer for its environmentally-friendly practices, such as working with suppliers to obtain eco-friendly materials and recycling wastes. The company's manufacturing facilities are pictured above, below and at the bottom of page 52.





Cruiser RV's production plant (pictured above) is certified as being "green" by TRA Certification Inc., a third-party verification company. Several RV manufacturers have attained certification by TRA for their eco-friendly practices.

EverGreen markets itself as "the truest form of *green* RV," Boessler says. "We're just not the same chocolate chip cookie you're going to find in every store," he says. "Being *green* in today's world is very cliché. Anybody can claim that."

Boessler says EverGreen hangs its hat on its *green* claims.

"The supply chain loves to come to us when they come up with something new and something innovative. We enjoy testing it and trying to bring it to market, but it has to be viable and, obviously, sustainable," he says.

To live up to its *green* billing, EverGreen collaborates closely with its suppliers on obtaining eco-friendly materials, according to Boessler, and stresses recycling (wire, wood and pallets, for instance) and other eco-friendly manufacturing procedures at its 125,000- and 110,000-square-foot plants in Indiana. As an example, EverGreen employs eco-friendly ComposiTek composite materials rather than eco-unfriendly Luan for flooring in its EverLite travel trailers and fifth wheels.

Boessler says EverGreen sometimes must search outside the RV industry for eco-friendly materials. That's where it

found the maker of CosmoLite composite panels to use in place of wood panels.

"That's been a great product for us, but it's difficult to find a lot of components that are marketed toward *green*," he says. "Many times, the supply chain's not ready for it or is cautious in offering it because of cost restraints."

Boessler declines to offer a dollar figure, but he does say it costs more to buy eco-friendly components than it does to buy non-*green* components. Why? Less demand from RV manufacturers for *green* materials, he says.

"Right now, the RV business is so competitive from a price perspective that any additional cost is going to be resisted," says Rick Lavers, president and CEO of RV consulting firm Monarch Consulting LLC and the former president and CEO of Coachmen Industries.

The extra manufacturing expense can pay off, though, Boessler maintains, even if the manufacturer can't pass along all of the extra eco-friendly costs to consumers. And, in fact, the costs may not show up at all on the dealer's price tag. That's because the dealer may sell an EverGreen RV in a price range comparable to a competitor's RV, he says.

What tips the balance in EverGreen's favor? Boessler credits the "feel-good story" of buying an eco-friendly RV rather than a more traditional RV.

Leazenby concurs.

"Consumers are looking for products

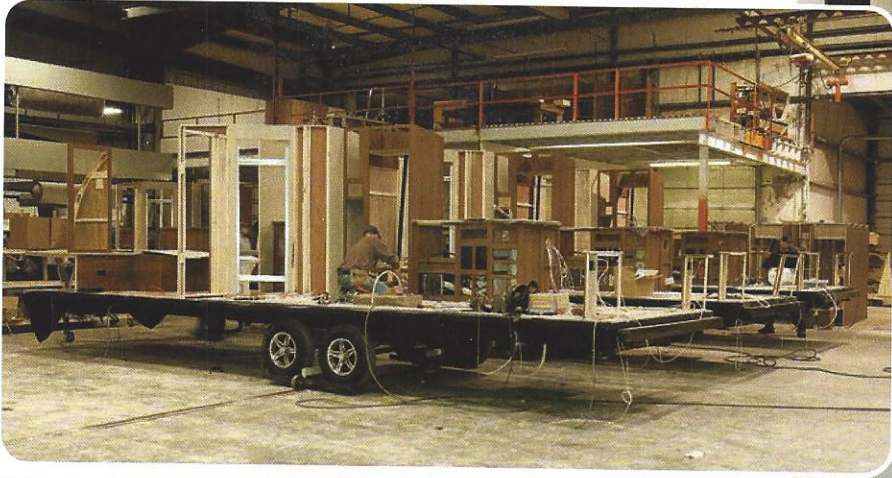
that stand out," she says. "They are also looking for proof, and when that means they (products) are certified *green*, it should be backed up third-party verification. There is no room for 'green-washing' in this industry. If an RV is *green* or *eco-friendly*, it will have the TRA label on it."

What's in a Label, Anyway?

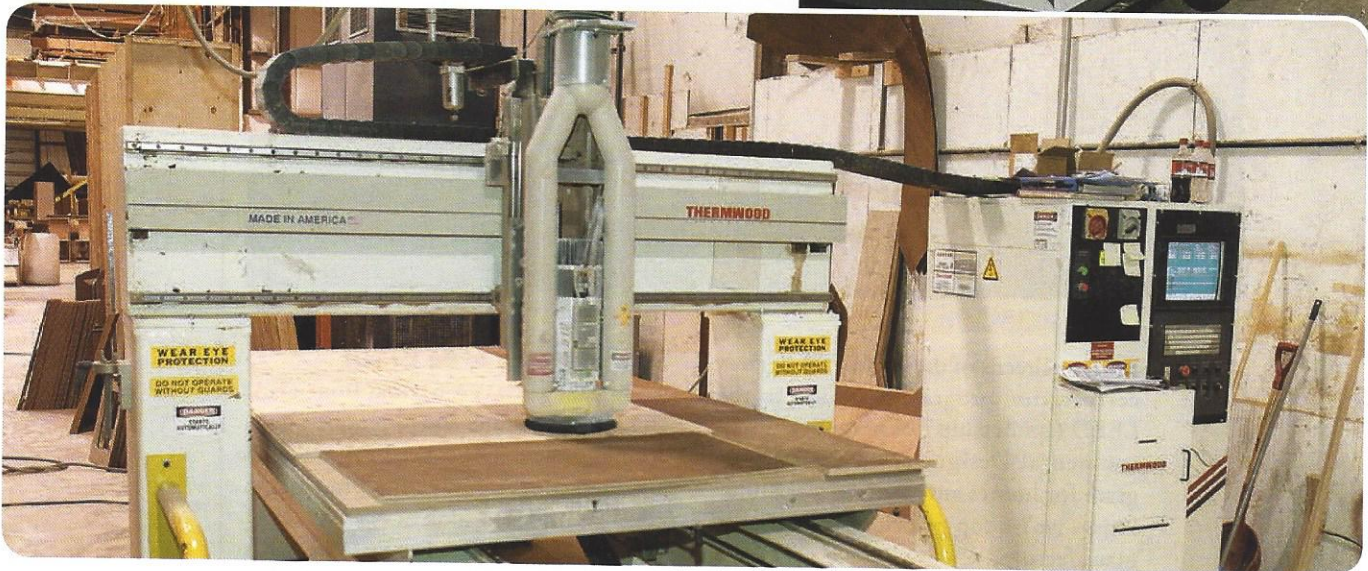
RVs from Winnebago Industries don't come with the TRA label. Still, the company touts its *green* credentials.

"Winnebago Industries has a proud and lengthy history of embracing the great outdoors and operating our company in a manner that is respectful to the environment," says Sheila Davis, Winnebago's public relations and investor relations manager. "In fact, we have received numerous awards over the past several decades for our recycling and waste management efforts. We are also the unsurpassed leader in the manufacture of fuel-efficient recreation vehicles."

Davis says nearly 30 percent of its motorhomes sold in 2012 achieved fuel efficiency of at least 15 miles per gallon, which the company boasts is a benchmark not reached by any other RV manufacturer. Winnebago also says it pioneered Thermo-Panel construction for the sidewalls of its motorhomes, providing durable, well-insulated, lightweight walls that contribute to better fuel economy. The roofs and floors of Winnebago's



Before bestowing recognition upon a company as being a “green” manufacturer, TRA Certification takes a detailed look at all aspects of an RV manufacturer’s operations, including how an RV is made and what goes into making the components. Five key factors related to construction are: resource efficiency, energy efficiency, indoor environmental quality, and operation and maintenance.



motorhomes also incorporate Thermo-Panel construction.

Lavers says studies show eco-friendly consumers typically are inclined to pay only about 5 percent more for a *green* product versus a non-green product. He points out that 5 percent really adds up when it comes to buying an RV. That’s why consumers want a tangible benefit from a *green* RV, such as the improved fuel efficiency promised by Winnebago.

Lavers offers this advice to RV manufacturers: “Don’t try to charge

a premium for *green*, because it’s very dangerous. Consumers don’t tend to respond to it. If they can get *green* for the same price as non-green, hey, that’s a good thing. But if they have to pay for it, a lot of people are knocked right out of the equation.”

Lavers doesn’t envision *green* RV manufacturing really taking off unless consumers demand it or regulations require it. For now, no such regulations are in place; the TRA program is the only game in town.

Leazenby acknowledges that, unlike



the EverGreens of the world, TRA's *green* certification program – similar to the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification program for homes and commercial buildings – isn't a top priority for every RV manufacturer.

"Most RV manufacturers are aware of the green program that TRA offers. But it's not for everyone, and we realize that," she says. "We do not want to get into the situation that Energy Star experienced where the market became saturated with new Energy Star homes and their program became diluted."

She adds, "We hope that more manufacturers will challenge themselves to be the best of the best. As other *green* building programs evolve, the standards and minimum requirements will change and become more stringent. What once was considered a *green* 'feature' might become the new standard."

What It Means to Be Green

To gain *green* certification from TRA, an RV manufacturer and its products must go under the microscope. TRA evaluates a manufacturer's production process and takes an in-depth look at every facet of an RV, Leazenby says. For instance, TRA examines how an RV is made and what goes into making the components. When it comes to construction, she says, being *green* boils down to a combination of five factors: resource efficiency, energy efficiency, water efficiency, indoor environmental quality, and operation and maintenance.

Lavers says that any one of those five factors "could be – if they're real – a different reason for calling something a *green* RV."

Some TRA certification factors, such as how much wood is recycled, can be seen at the factory, Leazenby says. Other factors must be researched, including whether the carpeting or hard flooring is eco-friendly, and whether it meets industry standards.



Mark Boessler, president and COO of EverGreen RV, says his company (the company's manufacturing facility is pictured above) takes tremendous pride in building an eco-friendly product and in being designated as Emerald Award winner by TRA. "There is green in everything we build," he says.

Bob Wheeler, president and CEO of Airstream, says his company received "a lot of credit" from TRA for practices it already had adopted, such as using low-VOC materials, low-flow fixtures, energy-efficient LED lighting and Eco-Batt insulation. In addition to those practices, Wheeler points out that an estimated 70 percent of all Airstream travel trailers ever made are still on the road.

"The fact that our products have withstood the test of time is a *green* story aside from the certification process," he says.

Ned Collins, president and CEO of Columbia Northwest, says the TRA certification process was "pretty painless" for his company, as it had to change almost nothing about its factory, materials, or product design to secure Gold certification.

Collins says the biggest benefit of TRA

certification "is being able to explain to and show to potential customers that we respect and share their values."

Indeed, more values-driven customers soon may be in the RV market. As ecologically-minded young people grow older and grow more interested in *green* products, they'll become the RV consumers and the RV industry leaders of the future, according to Leazenby. And that could lead to stepped-up standards for *green* RVs.

"It's often conflicting when generations try to decide what's best for each other. Just like a 20-year-old has no clue what amenities a 60-year-old finds the most valuable in an RV, the other way around doesn't quite work, either," Leazenby says. "That's why market research and a good mix of decision-makers are key."

She adds, "Like it or not, *green, eco-friendly, sustainable* or whatever term is

used is important to most people. The reasons may be different, perhaps. Some may like these products because they are better for themselves and their family. Some may like them because they have an extended life – LED lights for example – and have a positive impact on their wallets. And some may like eco-friendly products because they are new and innovative."

While *sustainable* or *eco-friendly* may be important to consumers, Boessler acknowledges the true definition of a *green* RV can be "awfully ambiguous." Many consumers just can't be certain how much of an RV truly is *green*, despite the presence of the TRA standard.

"Is that the standard that the industry should follow? It's what *we're* following," Boessler says. "We're very proud to be the first Emerald-qualified product. That certainly matters to us greatly. There is *green* in everything we build."

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