Housing has been 'greenwashed'

By Mary Umberger

January 6, 2010

Walk through any home-remodeling expo these days, and you could be forgiven for thinking that the entire industry has gone mad for green.

Everything from roofing shingles to basement wall-sealants seem to bear some kind of "eco" stamp lately, testament to manufacturers' determination to appeal to consumers' apparently heightened appreciation for sustainability, energy conservation and plain old earth-friendliness.

"If you actually took all the marketing claims at face value, then the environment should be in great shape," says Henning Bloech. "Everything is 'green.' "

Bloech spends a great deal of time contemplating such claims. He's the executive director of the GreenGuard Environmental Institute, an Atlanta-based organization that, among other things, independently tests chemical emissions of homebuilding products to certify that they meet indoor air-quality standards.

His group is one of a relative handful of so called "third-party certifiers" that set standards and verify manufacturers' claims of their products' environmental attributes. Bloech says that though many companies

have earnestly endeavored to earn their eco merit badges, many others are just pretending – making marketing claims that have become known as "greenwashing."

"It's extremely widespread," Bloech says. "It's everywhere."

And greenwashing manifests itself in myriad ways, experts say. TerraChoice, an Ottawa-based marketing company that describes itself as specializing in sustainable products, in 2009 tested 2,219 products in various categories that made about 5,000 "green" claims; it found that only 25 were not guilty of at least one of its "seven sins of greenwashing," which include making claims that are vague, lack proof, or are outright misrepresentations, among others.

"There is just a lack of standards on how to define what is green," agrees Christopher Nelson, director of corporate development for UL Environment, a recently launched arm of Underwriters Laboratories that will set environmental standards and vet environmental claims for manufacturers' products.

One of ULE's two programs validates environmental claims, he said.

"If a product says it's made with 'X,' 'Y' or 'Z,' we test whether that's true," he said. "We're not saying that's good or bad, just that you can trust that the statement is accurate."

The other program tests sustainability, "that you can trust that it has met certain environmental guidelines that have been established through a third-party process," he said.

Third-party certification is time-consuming and expensive, Bloech says. Typically, such processes are funded by licensing fees that manufacturers pay in exchange for the right to advertise that they've passed the tests. Some groups, however, solicit public donations.

In addition to manufacturers who tout their own green credentials, Bloech says "second-party certification" is another source of information for consumers; most often, these are tests conducted through trade groups, such as those representing cabinet or carpet manufacturers.

"There are a lot of second-party certifications, and that's not necessarily bad," he says. "Some have fairly stringent requirements, but they still remain industry programs, and that may be a little bit of a conflict of interest."

Bearing in mind that standards vary, depending on who's doing the certification and what their goals are, here are some online sources for consumers who want to check out homebuilding-related products and manufacturers:

- **Green Guard:** Certifies products that have been tested for their chemical-emissions performance and their effect on indoor air quality.
- **Green Seal:** The nonprofit says it evaluates products or services, many of them related to construction and remodeling, on a life-cycle assessment basis – from material extraction though manufacturing and use and recycling and disposal.
- **UL Environment:** verifies manufacturers' claims and separately certifies sustainability standards.
- **LEED:** The United States Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design program provides third-party verification that buildings or communities are designed and built with the aim of improving energy performance, water efficiency, emissions reduction, indoor air quality, and stewardship of resources.
- **Scientific Certification Systems:** certifies aspects of a product's environmental impact in such individual categories as recycled content and indoor air quality or overall life-cycle assessment.
- **Energy Star:** A joint program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy that rates products on their energy-efficient products and practices.