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**Earth Advantage teams with homebuilders**  
by Mark Anderson - 5.30.07



All of the houses in Orenco Station in Hillsboro, Ore., are Earth Advantage-certified.

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**We can take builders from light green to heavy green.**



Sean Penrith, Earth Advantage

An unpredictable housing market, fluctuating energy prices and consumer preference toward sustainability have created a perfect storm for the green housing market. With a focus on energy efficiency and indoor air quality, Portland-based Earth Advantage has become a strong player in the Northwest.

Madras Land Development Co. announced in April it is requiring all builders in Yarrow, its new master-planned community located east of Madras, Ore., to meet Earth Advantage standards. The Southern Oregon town of Shady Cove also announced in April it is recommending all new residential construction projects seek Earth Advantage certification. The decision marks the first time a city has implemented Earth Advantage into its bylaws, according to the organization.

"The basis behind Earth Advantage certification is an idea whose time has come," says Tom Kelly, president of Neil Kelly Co., a Portland-based remodeling firm started in the 1940s. "We've been involved with green building for many years," Kelly says. "It's been the fringe, and now it's becoming mainstream, like somebody switched a light bulb. We've seen more interest by consumers in the last year than the previous 10 years combined."

Earth Advantage provides benchmarks along with third-party verification for new homes and remodels. The U.S. Green Building Council chose Earth Advantage as the region's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Homes (LEED-H) pilot program provider. Kelly worked with Earth Advantage to certify his home in Parkdale, Ore., which became the West Coast's first LEED-H-certified project.

"The most important thing about Earth Advantage is that it looks at the home as a system," says Laurie Rubenstein, vice president of sales and marketing for Legend Real Estate Services of Portland. "Consumers in all price ranges are concerned about energy efficiency and healthier homes. With a standardized program, consumers know who is truly green and who is doing just enough to be considered green."

Earth Advantage began in 2000 as a Portland General Electric (PGE) program before spinning off as a freestanding company in May 2005. The nonprofit certified just 14 homes in 2000. That number increased to 1,000 in 2004 and nearly 3,000 in 2006. Earth Advantage set a goal to certify 4,000 homes in 2007. Its staff has doubled to nearly 20 since November 2005, when executive director Sean Penrith was hired.

"We can take builders from light green to heavy green," says Penrith. "I think we're approaching the tipping point." Earth Advantage controls about 11 percent of the market share in the Portland metro region, according to Penrith, who attributes the growth of the Northwest green housing market both to builder and consumer interest.

One appeal to Earth Advantage certification, according to some builders, is that it can be applied *en masse* to new developments.

"To me, it was part of the package deal," says Ed Ohlmann, one of the first homeowners to move into Orenco Station, an award-winning Hillsboro, Ore., community of 1,800 Earth Advantage-certified housing units. "It's hard to put a price tag on it. ...It's the kind of thing that pays for itself."

Ohlmann didn't begin his home search by looking for Earth Advantage certification. But the virtues became increasingly obvious, especially when he noticed the energy-efficient windows on his new condominium were identical to what he'd installed on his previous home.

Earth Advantage turned a significant corner in February, when Portland's Regional Multiple Listing Service (RMLS) began tracking third-party certified green building attributes [see "See Portland plugs energy-efficient homes," *nwcurrent*, October 2006]. Area real estate listings now help consumers find homes with Earth Advantage, Energy Star and LEED for Homes designations.

"It helps educate realtors and the general public about sustainability," says Kria Lacher, an agent with Meadows Group Realtors. Lacher devised the idea for the green listings in 2004 and worked with Earth Advantage to convince the RMLS board to add them to the Web.

"Now people have an opportunity to evaluate options and make better selections," she says. "If you've got an old house with an octopus furnace and single-pane windows, you might want to change that before you try to sell."

Earth Advantage recently began offering a training program for real estate agents to help them learn about the benefits of green building design. Up to 40 people can take the workshop, which is offered monthly.

Penrith says the training opportunities have received a huge response. Entire real estate firms have approached Earth Advantage about sending all of their agents through the program, according to Penrith. "We want to create an army of green ambassadors in the real estate market," he says.

To give ambassadors more ammunition, Earth Advantage has announced plans to establish a carbon dioxide offset trading program for its customers by 2008, an endeavor Penrith says he is very excited about.

"We would package the offset like a share on NASDAQ," he says. "We hope to create a platform in Portland so that we can trade wherever it makes sense: London, Chicago, Portland. This is a voluntary market where there's a huge void."

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