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California Scheming: Greening the World One Building at a Time

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California's been a national pioneer in plenty of things, from amusement parks to cloverleaf freeways. The next frontier? Green construction.

California just passed a compromise version of its new "green building" code. The plan is to make new construction in California more energy-efficient and easier on the environment by tweaking everything from water usage to building materials themselves.

The new building code—which expands on a previous state effort to clean up public buildings and already-stringent efficiency standards—is a big part of California's push to curb its emissions of greenhouse gases by 2020. The lion's share of those cuts are meant to come from energy efficiency. Buildings seem like a good place to start. From the L.A. Times:

Building codes, until now an obscure part of government rule-making, have moved to the forefront in the battle over climate change and energy. Nationwide, buildings consume 39% of energy, 12% of potable water, and 40% of raw materials, according to the U.S. Green Building Council. The structures are also responsible for 39% of greenhouse gas emissions.

The new building codes pitted environmentalists against much of the construction industry, similar to the fights in Washington over broader laws meant to tackle climate change nationwide. Greens wanted even tougher standards, and wanted to make sure state rules wouldn't preclude cities like San Francisco from moving even faster. Builders faced with an economic crisis and an imploding housing market didn't want a green straight-jacket just yet. The standards will be voluntary until 2010, when they become mandatory.

Time will tell if the new codes hit their targets in terms of energy efficiency; plenty of homeowners and businesses are already moving that way due to rising electricity costs, anyway. But California's approach contrasts with glamorous, "moonshot" solutions to the energy crisis—nothing could possibly be more mundane than the nitty-gritty of building codes.

And yet, just as a nationwide thirst for renewable energy is fueling a new generation of solar- and wind-power mavens, new rules for construction are shaking the building tree as well. Concrete, for example, has been around for a few thousand years in different forms, and is a mainstay of construction (and thus greenhouse-gas emissions) around the world. Now it's getting a makeover.

Small companies like Carlstadt, N.J.-based Hycrete are tweaking the age-old recipes for concrete to make it impervious to water and corrosion. That saves time and money during construction, makes buildings last longer, and means the chemical-free concrete can be used again—not dumped in a landfill. Some venture capitalists sniff an opportunity far from the clean-tech spotlights; Hycrete just landed another \$15 million in series-C funding.

Is America's energy revolution really going to come one brick at a time?