

Report blasts fiber cement's 'green' claims

By Matt Griswold

June 29, 2009

PLASTICS NEWS STAFF



This house features vinyl siding sold under the Alside name.

ROYERSFORD, PA. (June 29, 11:50 a.m. ET) -- As the battle for a share of the "green" marketplace rages, opponents are going to ever more detailed lengths to prove each other's environmentally friendly claims false. A recent example is the war over vinyl siding.

Despite its being derived from oft-maligned PVC, a life cycle analysis proves vinyl siding to be a sustainable, green building material, said Tad Radzinski, president of the Royersford-based consultancy Sustainable Solutions Corp., in a new report prepared for the Vinyl Siding Institute Inc. in Washington.

Several factors, including the use of recycled content, termite resistance, and increased energy efficiency contribute to vinyl siding qualifying for points with green building certification programs.

"Vinyl siding is the only exterior cladding with both third-party product certification and certified installer programs, both of which are administered by an accredited, independent quality control agency," the Sustainable

Solutions report said.

Effective marketing and gobs of press coverage have left many consumers with the impression that fiber cement is the preferred cladding du jour. Some analysts estimate that prior to the global recession, fiber cement was taking about one point of market share annually from vinyl siding.

Officials at the Vinyl Siding Institute said that's misleading. According to the most recent U.S. Census data from 2007, vinyl siding continues to hover at above a 30 percent share of all single-family homes. Fiber cement is grouped in a census category dubbed "Other," including stone and cinder block, which has less than 15 percent of the cladding market.

"When you look at the census numbers, we're doing fine, because of 'green,' [and] because of insulated vinyl siding, which provides a product that has the benefits of traditional vinyl siding and increased insulating value," VSI President Jerry Huntley said in a recent telephone interview.

Huntley dismissed claims about vinyl siding made on the Web site of fiber cement siding manufacturer James Hardie Industries NV, the market leader in that space.

A product comparison guide on the site suggests that fiber cement is non-combustible, non-toxic, highly durable and impact resistant, and environmentally friendly — and that vinyl siding is none of those things.

"It may be naïve, but [VSI takes] the high road," Huntley said. "We provide the facts and citation for the science, and in the end we have to hope the good guys win."

Radzinski's report said that vinyl siding has good weather resistance and is virtually maintenance free. Fiber cement, according to the study, can absorb water if joints are not caulked and needs periodic painting.

Another red flag in Radzinski's report is that silica-based fiber cement can cause silicosis, an incurable lung disease, in installers who do not use dust masks or respirators.

"If you think about history and the way people look at various cladding products, people weren't basing decisions on science and facts," Radzinski said by phone. "They were basing it on snippets they've heard in the past or on documents that are old news."

From 1987-2000, there was a dioxin emissions reduction of more than 90 percent from the manufacturing of vinyl siding and other vinyl building products, despite significantly increased demand and volume, he said.

According to the EPA, PVC manufacturing accounts for 2 percent of the total dioxin released into the environment, less than diesel

trucks (5 percent), industrial wood burning (3 percent) and heavy equipment (2 percent).

Dana Schindler, director of siding marketing and product development for Associated Materials Inc. in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, said the future looks bright for vinyl siding.

"We're still 36-40 percent of the total market, and no one comes close to that," she said.

Jim Ziminski, president of Exterior Portfolio by Crane, a subsidiary of Columbus, Ohio-based Crane Building Products, agreed.

"The last thing any of us want to do is greenwash," he said. "We just want to get the facts out there. The facts are the facts, they can't be disputed, and are in our favor, big time.

"Cradle to grave, vinyl is much more sustainable, and can rise above some of the general negatives about PVC. [Members of] Generation Y and the [following] generation know how to do research now. It's the great equalizer. Eventually, the facts will win."

Entire contents copyright 2009 by Crain Communications Inc. All rights reserved.