



Environmentalist of the Year

DNR program gives a reason for being green

By Nathan J. Comp

Green Tier
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Flexible regulation might sound like an oxymoron, especially when it comes to the traditionally adversarial relationship between heavy industry and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

But when the DNR launched its Green Tier program in 2004, the old paradigm began crumbling, and a new way of doing business and protecting the environment emerged. That's because Green Tier rewards developers who go above and beyond the minimum requirements enforced by the DNR, shedding the traditional command-and-control management practice for a more collaborative approach.

Leon Church, owner and president of Casaloma Properties Inc., Appleton, signed the Green Tier charter. And he said he now takes great pride in knowing his company is pushing forth a sort of green revolution.



Green Tier Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

In fall 2004, Church was part of a Wisconsin delegation to Germany, which nine years earlier adopted a similar approach to natural-resource management.

"It was a very enlightening trip," said Church. "It can be smart business to do a good job with the environment."

Wisconsin's Green Tier law, passed by the state Legislature in 2003, recognizes companies in all industries that voluntarily aim for higher environmental standards than those required by law. Green Tier helps businesses save money, reduce waste and improve the environment by offering an array of incentives, like streamlining the permit process, which now takes 45 days instead of six months.

Veridian Homes LLC, Madison, uses the program to remarkable success. Green Tier gave the home-building company the latitude to pursue innovative approaches to improving soil-erosion conditions and storm-water management through a combined system of soil-erosion socks and erosion fences.

In addition, Veridian is piloting a vinyl- and concrete-recycling program for Dane County

communities.

“Part of the beauty of the Green Tier program is that it encourages environmentally responsible businesses to continuously strive to improve processes that help improve our environment,” said Don Esposito, Veridian’s vice president of land acquisition and development. “Bottom line is that [we are now] continuously seeking building processes that have a lesser impact on the environment.”

While traditional regulatory powers are still in place, for Green Tier businesses, many of the headaches that come with dealing with the DNR are softened. For decades, the DNR’s focus was stopping abuse of the environment by enforcing a minimum set of standards.

Of course, there was no incentive for developers to go above and beyond those minimums, and, as a result, the environmental problems persisted. But Green Tier encourages developers to find creative ways to combat problems, like storm-water runoff.

“We’ve taken a process where you’re managing the environment at a minimum to where you’re doing it at a much higher level,” said Church.

For all intents and purposes, the Green Tier program is already making noticeable strides in protecting Wisconsin’s natural resources. The scrap-metal industry was the first to jump aboard, and nearly 100 businesses have since captured the conservation spirit and remained profitable.

But continued profitability is only one motivator for participating companies. There must also be a commitment to innovation.

“Green Tier only works if you realize you can do a better job,” Church said.

