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Builders see plenty of green at expo San Francisco show features environmentally friendly products for the home construction industry

By Barbara E. Hernandez
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SAN FRANCISCO - Chris Paganelli, an Alameda-based contractor, came to get a look at all the green products he had been hearing about.

"You can surf the Net for most of this stuff, but here you get to see, touch and feel," Paganelli said.

Thousands of vendors, builders, architects and designers prowled the halls of the Bill Graham Civic Center in search of green solutions for their clients at the West Coast Green Residential Building Conference and Expo on Friday.

The expo is open to the public from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. today.

Along with big names such as Kelly-Moore Paints, Panasonic and Mead Clark Lumber Co., visitors were able to meet smaller companies such as North Cal Wood Products, a Ukiah-based reclaimed lumber company, or YOLO Colorhouse, a Portland, Ore., company that specializes in paints with no volatile organic compounds.

"It's not just all about big companies. Contractors can decide to go local with the smaller guy instead," said Cameron Habel, a green builder from Oakland. "It's much more of an even playing field."

Habel and Paganelli said the building industry has been resistant to embrace green technology because of possible high costs to the builder.

"Basically if it works and doesn't make people sick, why change it?" Habel said. "But it's exciting to take that risk and make that change."

Paganelli said many building costs, such as using a soy-based adhesive, turn out to cost less than using a mainstream product.

"But if contractors aren't aware of those resources, it can be more expensive," he said.

Although a significant portion of the trade show vendors were hawking solar power and equipment, other companies displayed items including cabinet knobs and handles made from recycled glass and environmentally friendly flooring.

Sandra Yie of Yie Interiors, an interior designer from Burlingame, said she has to be aware of green products to be competitive with other designers and "stay ahead of the curve."

Other designers expressed the same sentiments.

"Our clients were pushing us in that direction, so we decided to come and see what's new and available," said Steven Stein of Miller Stein Interior Design in Palo Alto. "What we're seeing are a lot of old companies pushing new green products."

Aside from solar power, used lumber seemed to be a growing niche market at the expo.

North Cal Wood Products reclaims old-growth redwood lumber from bridges, tunnels, sawmills, buildings and even railroad ties around the North Coast, an area once known for a bustling timber industry.

"Our usual customer is environmentally friendly and conscious of what's going on in the world," said Douglas Ware, a sales associate. The company is now building the Mountain House Inn in Hopland using reclaimed wood and green building techniques as a showcase.

Ware said old-growth wood contains unusual patterns, such as "curly redwood," when the wood grain looks like curlicues. The larger pieces, some with old peg holes, are sanded, finished and used as beams or columns in houses, said Richard Jones.

"Our customers don't want to see any more trees cut down," said Jones, a sales and operations associate with North Cal. "They don't mind the holes or the marks."

PG&E was at the expo touting its "Solar Basics for Residential Customers" classes in San Francisco and Stockton. The classes teach homeowners about the environmental and financial benefits of using solar power.

According to state law, homeowners with solar power systems can produce more energy than their household uses and sell it back to PG&E for a monthly credit.

"Although we might lose money in the long term, our No. 1 goal is customer satisfaction," said Andrew Yip, project manager for PG&E's Self-Generation Incentive Program. "Using solar power helps feed the grid and offsets the energy load so we don't have to purchase as much power from generation plants." Barbara E. Hernandez covers real estate. Reach her at 925-952-5063 or bhernandez@cctimes.com.