

California Is Getting It Right!

Over the past two years there has been a lot of activity in California driving energy efficiency - with a major focus on HVAC.

Stakeholders in California have concluded that HVAC systems are one of the biggest users of energy in the state, and also among the most wasteful. HVAC also represents the “summer peak load” that taxes the grid and has caused power outages over the last decade. They also arrived at the consensus that poor installation and maintenance can far outweigh poor efficiency from lower SEER equipment.

For years NCI has been tracking delivered BTUs in residential systems at an average of less than 60% nationwide. That means a typical system adds or removes less than 60% of the BTUs it's rated for into the conditioned space!

A significant cause of the lost BTUs is how well or poorly a system is maintained. An even more significant culprit is poor installations. This includes how the original air distribution system was designed and installed, and to what degree it has degraded over time.



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WHPA Is Making A Difference

With these issues in mind, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) ordered that “...an HVAC Advisory Group should be chartered to involve high-level HVAC industry stakeholders—such as manufacturers, distributors, and contractors—to coordinate industry sponsorship of and participation in HVAC strategies. Membership should also include other key players, such as the CPUC, Energy Commission, utilities, building owners/managers, consumers, and the Federal government.”

With that mandate, a group of hard working individuals in California formed the Western HVAC Performance Alliance (WHPA) - an organization I'm proud to have been a part of since its inception. Their goals are somewhat lofty, but with participation from the organizations listed above as well as certification and training entities, the group has good representation by a cross-section of our industry.

Do they have some challenges? Absolutely. Do things sometimes get mired in the slow painstaking process of committee work? You bet. But in the end, much good is coming out of the process. Several utilities have begun funding and delivering strong Workforce Education and

Training (WE&T) programs, where contractors are the primary beneficiary of high-quality training.

Much of the basic training prepares techs for NATE certification exams. This training is being conducted by organizations like California-based IHACI (Institute of Air Conditioning Industries), who is also building training to comply with Quality Maintenance (QM) and Quality Installation (QI) programs. My organization was asked to contribute advanced HVAC performance training in both the residential and light commercial arena. Over the past 12 months through a Southern California Edison WE&T program, we've trained and certified hundreds of field personnel, with hundreds more being trained this year.

Utilities Supporting Good Contractor Training

A couple of California utilities have already begun, or are in the process of starting new Energy Efficiency programs focused on QI and QM. For example, ASHRAE/ACCA Standard 180 and ACCA Standard 4 are serving as the foundations for the commercial and residential QM programs by both Southern California Edison (SCE) and Pacific Gas and Electric. ACCAs QI Standard 5 has served as the cornerstone for SCE's QI program for 2 years.

Having utility incentive programs wrapped around these industry-developed concepts benefits contractors as well as home and building owners. The WHPA is taking a proactive approach to getting what's best about the industry the attention it deserves. The good news is the primary recipients of all this help are the quality-focused HVAC contractors!

What's really exciting is most utilities aren't stopping with baseline quality standards, rather they are seeking to reward owners and contractors with higher incentives for “Premium Level” work that exceeds the standards. No more “lowest common denominator.” This premium level could spell true differentiation for advanced contractors. This type of work will produce the highest level of energy efficiency, comfort, health and safety possible.

So it seems California **is** getting it right this time. It's still at its infancy, but the direction is good, and the fact that HVAC contractors have better representation this time around is very promising and exciting. 🍷

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