NACo’s ENERGY STAR program reaches 500+ county buildings

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ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL INTERN

Counties nationwide have tracked and assessed energy performance for more than 500 buildings as a result of NACo’s ENERGY STAR Benchmarking Assistance Program. January marks six years that NACo, in partnership with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s ENERGY STAR Program, has helped counties improve energy efficiency and reduce operational costs.

NACo’s partnership with the ENERGY STAR Program began in 2004 with the inception of the ENERGY STAR Courthouse Campaign. For the first time counties were able to use a simple online tool to log and track energy use in county courthouses and administrative buildings.

Robert Downing, Calhoun County, Ala. commissioner and NACo Green Government Initiative board member, was integral in initiating the campaign. Downing notes, “There is somewhere around 500 million square-feet of county courthouse space in the country, and if we could get those buildings to be more energy-efficient, it would save a lot of money. With the support of NACo staff the campaign became a reality.”

The campaign has since expanded and is now called the ENERGY STAR Challenge. It encourages counties to conserve energy and benchmark energy use for all building types.

Portfolio Manager

A key feature of the ENERGY STAR Program is the Portfolio Manager tool, a free, interactive online tool that enables counties to track and assess energy and water consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, and energy costs for individual buildings or “portfolios” of buildings. By measuring consumption, counties can evaluate cost savings, set up investment priorities, detect under-performing buildings, and verify the efficacy of energy-efficient improvements. To date, NACo has assisted more than 100 counties in using Portfolio Manager to benchmark their buildings’ energy use.

Washington County, Ore. began using Portfolio Manager in 2008 and currently monitors 23 buildings, seven of which qualify for the ENERGY STAR label.

“Our goal is to get an ENERGY STAR label for all of our buildings that qualify while continuing to improve savings on energy consumption for the rest of our facilities,” said Philip Bransford, Washington County’s communications officer. “Any time we use...
less energy we are improving the environment along with saving taxpayers’ dollars.”

**ENERGY STAR Counties**

A number of counties have received ENERGY STAR labels for their buildings. Mohave County, Ariz. leads with eight labeled buildings. Arapaho County, Colo., Ventura County, Calif., and Cuyahoga County, Ohio each have five qualified buildings.

Mohave County started its benchmarking efforts in 2005 when it joined the Green Government Initiative and became an ENERGY STAR Partner. For the past three years Mohave County buildings have been collecting ENERGY STAR labels. By the end of this year, the county hopes to reach 10 qualified buildings.

“Our goal is to be proactive in preserving and protecting natural resources and the environment,” said Gene Hepler, manager, Mohave County Office of Management and Budget. “We use [benchmarking] as a means to let people know we are doing our part to be more energy-efficient. Out there, people know the ENERGY STAR label.”

**Certification**

ENERGY STAR certification is not easy to earn. The label must be renewed every year and each building has to be certified by a professional engineer, but the hard work pays off. ENERGY STAR buildings are proven to optimize operational costs, benefit the environment and illustrate environmental leadership.

ENERGY STAR certification also paves the way for additional certifications and awards. Ada County, Idaho was one of the first counties to earn an ENERGY STAR label in 2004, and later received a LEED Silver certification for its courthouse from the U.S. Green Building Council. By earning the ENERGY STAR label, the courthouse became one of the nation’s most efficient buildings to operate.

Portfolio Manager has also been very useful to counties competing for Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) program funds. “Benchmarking helped with the EECBG grant, which required that energy consumption be measured,” Hepler noted.

Portfolio Manager serves as a catalyst for energy-efficiency improvements and other “green” initiatives, which create cost savings, improve public health and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Going forward, NACo plans to expand its energy benchmarking assistance and significantly increase the number of participating counties.

“I am proud of the fact that [counties] are collectively able to join through NACo to make improvements and show environmental leadership,” said Downing. “But we’ve only scratched the surface of our opportunities in terms of what we can be doing as counties. Our opportunity to expand and improve is limitless.”

If you would like to get involved with the NACo ENERGY STAR Benchmarking Assistance Program, please visit www.naco.org/greencounties.

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**How Portfolio Manager Works**

In Portfolio Manager the energy performance of a building is rated on a scale from 1 to 100. The rating evaluates energy consumption, building type, square footage and weather normalization. It is developed based on similar buildings included in the Commercial Building Energy Consumption Survey, a national survey conducted by the Department of Energy’s Energy Information Administration. A rating of 50 indicates that a building’s energy performance is 50 percent better than all similar buildings nationwide. Buildings earning a rating of 75 or greater may qualify for the ENERGY STAR label, which signifies exceptional energy performance.

ENERGY STAR does not offer ratings for all building types, such as jails, cafeterias and libraries, but counties can still use Portfolio Manager to track energy consumption and costs.