

What's a Green Building? California's 2011 Building Codes & LEED

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California's new building codes took effect January 1, 2011, and policy makers and the industry continue to explore its implications and impact. Referred to as CalGreen, the codes have raised the floor on minimum building standards for new construction, incorporated green elements into base code, and as such are another manifestation of California's leadership in the green economy.

There has been quite a bit of discussion about the relationship between the codes and rating systems like LEED. I'd like to place this issue in a larger context of the overall sustainability goals of California and the importance of leadership in the building industry.

The first distinction to keep in mind is that codes and rating systems are fundamentally, necessarily, and structurally different but complementary systems. Codes mandate minimum standards and some specific measures, whereas rating systems like LEED define leadership standards, are performance based, and are rigorously verified by an independent third party.

Industry and policy analysts widely agree that LEED is significantly more rigorous than the new building codes, and is the most powerful tool available for market transformation. In addition, LEED has systems for existing buildings, commercial interiors, core and shell, schools, neighborhoods and more. One way to think of all this is that codes define the floor (and are the law), whereas LEED sets the ceiling.

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