



October 19, 2009

### **THE SOLAR DECATHLON: INNOVATION RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE**

The Department of Energy and its National Renewable Energy Lab (NREL) are sponsoring a green technology competition that “challenges 20 college teams from around the globe in 10 contests to design, build, and operate the most livable, energy-efficient, and completely solar-powered house.” This year’s competition, which is being held on the national Mall, is the fourth one since 2002.

Called the Solar Decathlon, so-named for the ten ways to measure a house, the winner best blends aesthetics and modern conveniences with maximum energy production and optimal efficiency. This year’s overall winner, Team Germany, represents those qualities in its entry. Yet in order to meet these challenges, all of the university teams who enter the contest must often invent and refine green technologies that have never been seen before. In the words of Deputy Secretary of Energy Daniel Poneman, “The ingenuity that comes from individual effort is the promise of the future.” To meet these challenges, university teams from around the world often invent and refine green technologies that have never been seen before.

Wow! An unfettered hotbed for innovation right there under DOE’s nose!

Previous Decathlon competitions have been a source for innovative approaches to today’s environmental challenges. For example, during the 2007 competition, Team California worked with bamboo materials manufacturer Teragren to develop structural bamboo I-



beams, useful for their strength and sustainability, but something that had not previously

existed. As a result, structural bamboo has emerged as a new building category which the California team, working with Teragren, has continued to work on for its 2009 Decathlon entry.

It seems DOE might recognize the technological promise of this competition, too. Said Decathlon director Richard King, "I didn't realize the way it drives research and development. It started on the premise of education, but with each successive event, we keep marching forward." And information on some of these technologies is already being made available to consumers: every product, including insulation panels and furniture in the demonstration homes, is available in a product directory on the contest web site, [www.solardecathlon.org](http://www.solardecathlon.org).

The Solar Decathlon fosters ingenuity and collaboration and is a wonderful way to supplement DOE's efforts to meet new environmental mandates set by the current Administration. It seems that the Solar Decathlon is an idea whose time has truly come. Let's hope DOE and NREL make good use of these inventions.