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Volkswagen's national drive towards green

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Between government bailouts and burgeoning green technologies, it's been easy over the last few years to get lost in the American automotive world's two extremes - the good and bad of an industry searching for a new identity.

All the while, German automaker Volkswagen has been quietly grown into a major player in the American market.

Of course, part of the company's resulting growth can be attributed to its well-honed reputation for durable, efficient, affordable cars.

But with the company's massive Chattanooga, Tennessee plant having been recently awarded Platinum certification from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) - the nation's top building efficiency standard - it's clear that Volkswagen is beginning to stake its own claim to green.

"Volkswagen Chattanooga's LEED Platinum certification is the fulfillment of a promise that Volkswagen has made around the world and in this community that we will work in harmony with the environment," said Volkswagen Chattanooga CEO and chairman Frank Fischer. "Our commitment to building a LEED certified factory began in the planning and design stages."

Highly efficient insulation, hydroelectric power from a nearby dam, LED lighting, and state of the art rainwater collection and reuse system - estimated to save 50 million gallons of water over ten years - were just some of the factory's featured highlighted in the extensive report.

According to Rick Fedrizzi, president, CEO and founding chair of the U.S. Green Building Council, Volkswagen's Chattanooga plant provides an encouraging template for industries looking to render their operations more environmentally friendly.

"Building operations are nearly 40% of the solution to the global climate change challenge," said Fedrizzi. "While climate change is a global problem, innovative companies like Volkswagen Chattanooga are addressing it through local solutions."

Here in the Granite State, Volkswagen has established its own green outpost of sorts. Located in Greenland, in 2010 Seacoast Volkswagen became the first car dealership in New Hampshire to install a wind turbine. Earlier this year, the dealership augmented its clean tech first with a 20 kilowatt solar photovoltaic system.

Both the wind turbine and solar PV array were installed by the Seabrook-based Waterline Alternative Energies. The new array is expected to generate 30% of the dealership's electricity needs on sunny days.

For Doug Miles, owner of Seacoast Volkswagen, the dealership's commitment to green is as much a nod to the region's environmentalist-leanings as it is a nod to his own company's past commitments to efficiency.

"We're really lucky to be in a position where we can be an early adopter of new, green technologies,

both with our cars and with our energy use," said Miles. "Most car dealerships in this economy have had a tough go of it, but we're fortunate enough to have been in the market of fuel efficient vehicles for a long time."

Beyond the big ticket items, Seacoast Volkswagen has instituted a number of smaller green initiatives since moving from Portsmouth to Greenland seven years ago, including retrofitting all 60 parking lot lamps with LED bulbs - in the process slashing electricity from the lamps by 75%.

Inside the building, a comprehensive recycling program - which includes using the garage's waste oil to heat the premises, recycling all light bulbs, and reusing wash bay water through a water recycling unit - has helped reduce even further Seacoast Volkswagen's carbon footprint.

In 2010, the company became the first car dealership to join Green Alliance, the Portsmouth-based "green business union" which helps certify and promote sustainability-minded companies throughout the region.

Jim Cavan is the director of media and public relations at The Green Alliance, Portsmouth, N.H.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540