

Sustain what?

Our industry, institute, and society rightfully put substantial emphasis on sustainability. True sustainability is crucial to the well-being of humanity and the planet. In terms of a structure, sustainability can be measured in a lot of ways. These include how safe the structure is, how resilient it is, how long it lasts, how much energy it will use in its service life, how it makes people in and around it feel, and how it is built. Precast concrete performs at the highest level in every one of these categories. Over the very long life of a precast concrete structure, one of the least consequential measures may be the amount of carbon emitted before the material leaves our factories, yet it is this last measure that some are focused on.

A very important attribute of sustainability is perception, and we can mold the perception of precast concrete. Those of us who spend our lives with this wonderful material know it is the best way to build. We design and create beautiful structures that are resilient, durable, economical, and highly sustainable, yet some perceive concrete as an inferior material due to marketing by other industries. The idea of wood being a sustainable material is laughable. The first thing in the life cycle of a wood structure is cutting down trees, only to make buildings that burn, rot, blow away or get flooded out. It is hard to imagine a steel smelter being green. None of us want to project negativity into the market, so we must work harder to show how superior precast concrete really is for the built environment.

Other industries have done a fantastic job marketing the sustainable aspects of their products. The ski industry has the Protect Our Winters campaign that consists of handing out vinyl stickers to put on SUVs. The PVC industry puts a U.S. Green Building Council logo on every stick of plastic pipe. A look at any petroleum company website will show you how green they want us to think they are. The airline industry touts mythical green fuel and electric planes. We really do produce structures that outperform in terms of sustainability. We need to be able to convey this in simple, honest terms.

It is also important to keep sustainability, and particularly carbon emissions, in perspective. The best-selling vehicles are still large and powered by gas. Technology companies are negotiating direct supply agreements with nuclear power plants because of their massive electrical demand. Artificial intelligence computing has already wiped out decades of energy conservation efforts. Air travel is regularly setting records for busiest travel days. While sustainability has to be a component of our message, it can't be the only message. Fortunately, we have a lot of good things to talk about with precast, prestressed concrete.

Cheers, and stay green! 🍷



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