

EnergyStar ratings systems may be in need of major updates

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In a sea of energy-guzzling consumer products, the government's EnergyStar sticker is a beacon of light for many energy-conscious consumers. But that little blue square with a star on it might not be so bright after all, according to Consumer Reports, which claims that the decades-old program is in need of some major upgrades.

But first, a little background on EnergyStar.

In 1992, the U.S. [Environmental Protection Agency](#) created the voluntary labeling program to help cut greenhouse gas emissions by identifying the most energy-efficient appliances for consumers. Since then, the EPA has partnered with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to include more than 60 product categories that use less energy while delivering the same or better performance as comparable models.

Overall, it's been pretty successful in its goals. In 2008, with the help of EnergyStar, Americans cut greenhouse gas emissions equal to those from 29 million cars and saved consumers billions on utility bills.

But despite its overall success, the EnergyStar does have some quality issues that raise questions about the program's integrity.

For one, EnergyStar's test procedures for appliances are pretty outdated and haven't kept pace with new technology, says Mark Connelly, deputy technical director for Consumer Reports.

A good example is EnergyStar's test procedures for refrigerators, which were developed 20 years ago before consumers had ever heard of features like meat-thawing compartments, water filters and automatic defrost.

As a result, EnergyStar test procedures call for a refrigerator's icemaker to be turned off during testing. But since extra features mean extra energy consumption, it's no surprise that some LG [refrigerator](#) models were found to use significantly more energy during Consumer Reports' tests where the icemaker was kept on, as compared to energy consumption rates determined under the EnergyStar tests.

"We need to have tests that are more representative of real-life scenarios because the products are using much more energy than what the consumer would be led to believe," Connelly says.

To be fair, the fault of the test procedures doesn't really lie with EnergyStar, but instead with the DOE because it's the agency responsible for determining the federal testing standards for appliances. And, once Consumer Reports brought the refrigerator issue to light, the DOE and LG agreed to suspend 22 French-door models from the EnergyStar program because they consumed too much energy to qualify.

But being behind the times isn't EnergyStar's only problem. Critics charge that EnergyStar has set the bar for energy-efficiency requirements so low that just about any product can get a star.

For example, almost half of all dishwashers currently on the market qualify for the EnergyStar label, according to Connelly.

"Certainly, when that many products qualify for an EnergyStar, the value of the Star decreases," he said.

Maria T. Vargas, press contact for EnergyStar, disagrees, arguing that increasing the number of qualifying products is a goal of the program, not a flaw. "We think it's great that more efficient products are available on the marketplace," she said.

But by far the most troubling aspect of the government's energy-efficiency program is that because most EnergyStar products aren't independently tested, companies are relied on to regulate themselves -- essentially allowing the fox to police the henhouse.

"Manufacturers basically self-certify, and there's nobody out there policing what the government's being told," says Connelly. "There needs to be some kind of auditing in place because otherwise you're either relying on the manufacturers to snitch on each other or someone like Consumer Reports to just happen upon a problem."

Of course, the EPA and Consumer Reports disagree on whether competitors are actually testing each other's product efficiency claims. One thing that is certain is that as companies continue to gobble up their competitors, the number of companies available to check up on one another's products keeps dwindling, which further decreases accountability.

With all of EnergyStar's problems, it's easy to get cynical about paying extra for that little blue label. But keep in mind that even Consumer Reports feels that overall the program is reliable.

"The cases where we've found discrepancies are small and far between," said Connelly.

Most importantly, the program has been widely successful in getting out the word about energy efficiency, or at least making consumers aware that such a thing exists. More than 70 percent of U.S. consumers know

about the EnergyStar logo, and with the countless number of product claims out there today, that's no small feat.

At the very least, EnergyStar serves as a good jumping off point for consumers who want to know more about a product's [energy consumption](#).

"Overall the program is working because it simplifies choices for consumers and in that respect it's been a tremendous success," said Connelly. But, he adds, "there's always room for improvement."

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