Racing ahead in the sunshine State?

New regulations on the energy efficiency of air conditioners will impact on the industry Nationwide as of next year, but has Queensland jumped the gun by introducing its own minimum requirements? Caroline Kearney investigates.

A
round 70% of Queensland households have at least one air conditioner, and this "typical" household uses 27% of its total electricity on heating and cooling. By 2020 it is estimated Queensland residents will use almost twice the electricity of other States combined (excluding NSW) to cool their homes. These figures have pushed the Queensland Government to introduce new regulations on the sale and installation of air conditioners in an attempt to help reduce household carbon footprints and running costs.

As of September 2009 in Class 1 and 2 buildings (houses, townhouses and units) air conditioners up to a cooling capacity of 6.5kW installed must now meet a minimum Energy Efficiency Ratio (EER) of 2.9, which generally equates to 4-Stars under AS/NZS 3823.2:2005. The law applies to new and second-hand split systems, ducted systems and window/wall box units – but not to evaporative or portable systems.

CHOICE senior sustainability policy officer Victoria Coleman says placing the onus for compliance on the consumer by regulating at the sale and installation level is not ideal. "Consumers could "unwittingly" travel to NSW to buy a cheaper air conditioner, install it, and consequently face fines," she says.

While it is not clear exactly how the scheme will be policed, the onus is also on the trades to ensure they install compliant products under QDC 4.1 – Sustainable buildings.

Comparatively, new federal minimum energy performance standards (MEPS) regulations due for release in April 2010 place the onus on importers and Australian manufacturers to ensure the EER on air conditioners falls between 2.75 and 3.33. The national regulations apply to split system air conditioners and equate to just under 5.5-Stars for equipment with a cooling capacity less than 4kW, and over 4-Stars for units with a cooling capacity of over 4kW.

Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Equipment Manufacturers Association of Australia (AREMA) is the industry body representing the manufacturers, importers and distributors of air conditioning and refrigeration equipment in the Australian market. AREMA president Bernie Bugdalski says the MEPS scheme is the most sensible way to go about regulating the industry.

"This is a joint proposal of the Federal and State Governments, and is what the industry has been planning around. In stark contrast to what has happened in Queensland, this is the agreed way forward. MEPS involve an open and transparent process, with established channels for consultation with industry, which the Queensland Government ignored in this case."

"Once the decision is made to raise the Standard, notice is given and the import
or domestic manufacture of those air conditioners is banned from that date. This is a relatively simple, clean and effective process – you simply turn off the tap. Any equipment that is already in the country can still be sold so you simply stop any more being imported or manufactured.”

Bernie says the Queensland scheme is also unlikely to have any positive environmental impact.

“Bans on sale are clumsy and inefficient, as well as expensive and difficult to police. On a State level they are even more absurd – existing equipment gets transported to other States, where it is still legally sold and used. The only change to Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions is that they are slightly increased, due to the additional and wasteful transport of equipment.”

**Impact on the installer**

The new MEPS regulations will have little impact on the trades nationally in that all products currently legal in the market will remain so using a gradual phase-out model.

For those working in Queensland, or across the States, things are a little murkier. Products that remain legal in all other States will be banned in Queensland, putting tradespeople at risk of unwittingly selling and installing non-compliant product.

“The way the Queensland Government has pushed the onus onto the consumer and installer shows just how poorly thought out this situation is,” says Bernie. “The only effective way is to control the product entering the market; you don’t try and regulate what is already there.

“If equipment was legally imported or manufactured, it should be legally able to be sold, and consumers should be able to purchase equipment with confidence. The Queensland approach operates way down the distribution chain, placing responsibilities on consumers and small businesses that are best handled by regulating manufacture and import at a national level.

“Pity the poor installer – he may have equipment in stock that he now has to arrange to sell outside the State. It will involve the industry needlessly transporting equipment from one State to another, disrupting business and contractual difficulties, as well as general uncertainty. It will have negative effects on equipment suppliers, contactors, builders, retailers and ultimately consumers.

“In various parts of Queensland contractors and builders are already doing it tough due to challenging financial conditions – this is just one more difficulty they have to deal with. The frustrating thing is that this simply adds costs and uncertainty, while producing an environmental outcome that is, if anything, slightly negative.”

**Green reasoning**

The average Queensland household produces 8.2 tonnes of greenhouse gases each year. As part of its Towards Q2