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Sarasota Herald-Tribune (FL)

Eco-Smart's materials build for future

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Hurricane Charley put more of a spotlight on Matt Ross' business than any advertising campaign ever could.

Now, the president and founder of Sarasota-based **Eco-Smart** Inc. believes the memory of the disastrous storm will translate into more business in Charlotte County and beyond. **Eco-Smart** sells disaster-resistant, environmentally sound home-building materials to homeowners, builders, contractors and developers.

For the last few years, **Eco-Smart** has steadily pulled in \$500,000 to \$750,000 in annual gross sales, but it is on track for \$1.25 million this year, Ross said.

With Charley's damage firmly in mind, more people are using **Eco-Smart** products to build their new homes and retrofit their old ones, Ross said.

This year's major hurricanes, Katrina and Rita, have only increased the interest.

A half-dozen builders have signed on to use **Eco-Smart** products in Sarasota and Manatee counties, along with four in Charlotte, where business is growing, Ross said.

"I expect Charlotte County to become a big market for us in the future," Ross says. "The memory of Hurricane Charley coming through there underlines the value of disaster resistance."

Ross founded **Eco-Smart** in 1993 as a company that promoted energy-efficient lighting. He later partnered with Sarasota's Florida House Institute for Sustainable Development, which designed a model home to showcase environmentally friendly products.

The goal of **Eco-Smart**, which uses a dollar sign instead of the letter "S" in its logo, is to promote and sell the kinds of products



Harold Bubil
Real Estate Editor

The gold rush is on.

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featured in the Florida House, Ross says.

The company's motto is "Healthy, efficient, disaster resistant products for better living."

Ross, who calls himself "an environmentalist by upbringing," has always made priorities of environmental consciousness and energy efficiency.

But he's also a salesman by trade, and he's placed a special focus on his storm-safe products since Hurricane Charley.

Those include:

- * Removable storm panels.
- * Recycled roof materials that resemble wood shingles and stand up to heavy weather.
- * Alternative decking that comes with a 50-year warranty against rot and decay.
- * Solar-powered, weatherproof house numbers that are visible from 200 feet away at night.

Builders in Charlotte and Sarasota have bought more and more of these kinds of products since Charley, Ross says. The company markets itself to keep them in the public eye, but Hurricane Katrina provided the best advertising possible.

"One of the things we've learned over the years is how to market," he says. "The products built out of our houses have always been disaster-resistant, but now it's more on people's radar screen."

One of **Eco-Smart's** biggest pushes in Charlotte County is coming in the form of the Enclaves of Notre Dame development south of Punta Gorda.

Sarasota developer Stephen Weeks is offering **Eco-Smart** products to buyers in his development, which is under construction and could have more than 20 homes. Weeks also is building another Florida House for his new community.

Weeks said he's using **Eco-Smart** products because any new development in Charlotte County needs to be hurricane safe. Charley illustrated that when it damaged every fourth house in the county.

"I had read that green houses are the wave of the future," he says. "Florida House recommends Matt and I wanted to build a house that was green environmentally and safe for the future."

The bulk of **Eco-Smart's** business comes from Sarasota, Charlotte and Manatee counties. But it serves customers all over the state, Ross says, and contracts independent

representatives in Atlanta, San Diego and the Bahamas.

The Florida House model home's visibility aids **Eco-Smart's** popularity in Sarasota County. New model homes planned in Englewood and Punta Gorda could do the same in Charlotte County.

Sarasota's Florida House, at the corner of Beneva and Proctor roads, gives potential buyers a center to view **Eco-Smart's** products in action.

While some homeowners contact **Eco-Smart** directly, the company primarily sells to builders and developers who offer the products to home buyers, Ross says.

Much of **Eco-Smart's** business in Charlotte County is coming from builders who are putting up homes for residents moving into the area, he said.

Ross, who studied engineering and computer science at Duke University, said that is evidence of the growing popularity of homes built with weather-resistant, environmentally safe products.

He wants **Eco-Smart** to lead that trend.

"We've noticed a distinct upturn in consumers coming to us and saying, 'Where do we get homes like these?'" he says. "I see that market really taking off" in Charlotte County.

Caption: STAFF PHOTO / DANIELLE RAPPAPORT /
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Matt Ross is president of **Eco-Smart**, a company that provides environmentally friendly, hurricane-resistant building materials.

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