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Olga Galacho
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IT WON'T be long before environmental awareness sanitises children's fairytales and rhymes in the same way that political correctness has attempted.

Can you picture the tale of *The Three Little Pigs* evolving to include a fourth little porcine sibling whose house will be built from materials that can withstand the modern-day version of the Big Bad Wolf, namely rising energy costs?

The sooner, the better, because with the price of US oil recording its biggest one-day hike early this week and electricity and gas bills tipped to rise when carbon trading begins, homeowners are going to need more than bricks and mortar to live happily ever after.

The manufacture of conventional building materials -- bricks, cement, steel, aluminium requires an enormous amount of energy.

This week Melbourne is hosting a whiz-bang sustainable building symposium, SB08, with 60 experts from around the world discussing hi-tech building materials, architectural designs, energy-saving devices and all manner of other innovations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the construction sector.

While Victorian policymakers gloat over Monday's announcement that Delfin Lend Lease will build just one zero-emission display home in Laurimar, 30km north of Melbourne, by late next year, dozens of experts are in town talking about established low and zero carbon-free housing around the world.

They are sharing policy ideas such as the UK laws that will force developers to build only zero-carbon houses from 2016 and the stamp duty exemption that applies to such houses that are built between now and 2012.

British builder Barratt said in May, after unveiling its first zero-carbon home, that it would build 200 more of them by 2011. A third will be affordable enough for low-income buyers.

Much closer to home, and much sooner, environmentalist Brendan Condons Australian Ecosystems is set to develop 200 zero-carbon, affordable homes in South Gippsland's Cape Paterson.

The built environment accounts for about 40 per cent of Australia's carbon emissions, according to construction giant Mirvac. The group regularly bemoans that innovation to reduce emissions from its sector has been slow to stimulate market transformation.

Industry is looking to legislators to speed up the transformation, but even the Laurimar project appears to be another example of carbon policy paralysis.

The goal of the project -- which is a joint effort by Delfin, the CSIRO, Sustainability Victoria and the Henley Property Group -- is to demonstrate energy savings of 70 per cent compared with similar homes. The energy use and emissions of the home's occupants will be monitored over a year to gauge the success of the project.

It sounds like an attempt to reinvent the wheel. Carbon neutral housing is already proven in many countries. That's the lesson out of this week's SB08 symposium.

At next week's COAG meeting, legislators will consider reforms to accelerate energy efficiency, including feed-in tariffs that reward building owners for electricity produced by their solar power units -- systems so crucial to achieving carbon-neutral housing.

Let's hope the decisions taken at COAG are informed by the wealth of information that has been delivered in Melbourne over the past few days.

Zero-carbon houses are not the stuff of fairytales. Bring on the fourth little pig to show how feasible it is to stop buildings from hogging energy and to open up opportunities for new, carbon-friendly industries.

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