

Article Published in LBM JOURNAL 9/2007

Green Isn't Black & White

By Rick Schumacher

When I first began covering this industry in 1990, it was during the midst of a war between “us” (the lumber/building material industry) and “them” (“greens”—environmental preservationists).

America's national forests were a primary battleground, and a cute little woodland creature called the Northern spotted owl was at the center of the chaos. Back then, with livelihoods and vital resources at stake, complicated by tree-spikings and fire-bombings by domestic terrorist groups like Earth First!, it's no wonder that for many in our industry, “green” was a four-letter word.

It's now 17 years later, and times have changed. “Green” no longer represents the enemy. Among other things, green means sustainable building that uses environmentally friendly materials. Global warming is no longer a theory, and green is something that a growing number of homeowners, builders, and remodelers are embracing.

As the primary supply pipeline for the residential construction and remodeling market, you are in an enviable position—provided you and your company understand what makes a product green, and why.

In June, as part of an extensive Readership Profile study LBM Journal commissioned, we asked several green questions. When asked “would you be able to identify a ‘green’ product without the help of a certifying label or third-party organization?,” more than 58% said no. Labels and logos are helpful tools, but their absence doesn't mean a product isn't green. In fact, lumberyards likely have stacks and racks of the original green building material: lumber.

I'm not going to open the can of worms that pits FSC-certified wood against SFI-certified wood, because I believe this is one product category that doesn't require a label to be identified as green. And I'm not alone. Noted environmentalist Patrick Moore—one of the original founders of GreenPeace—is a vocal proponent of using more lumber and growing more trees. If this concept intrigues you, I strongly suggest you visit his web site, www.greenspirit.com, or pick up his book, “Green Spirit: Trees are the Answer.” Everyone whose livelihood depends on the forest products industry should spend serious time studying Moore's rational, logical, and compelling message.

In this issue's InDepth, our green guru John D. Wagner identifies numerous specific products within several product categories, and explains what makes them green. However, this is by no means an exhaustive, all-inclusive list. In fact, as John defines it in his introduction, green isn't black and white.

One product occupying this enormous gray area is pressure-treated wood. Even if the chemicals themselves used to treat the wood aren't "green" (though next-generation wood treatments are making remarkable progress toward preservatives that are either organic, natural—like borate—or that disguise the wood as a non-food product), pressure-treated wood's green attributes include extending the useful life of the wood, which reduces the need to harvest trees. In addition, lumber used in treated wood typically comes from fast-growing, managed forests, and life-cycle analyses that measure environmental impact show that treated wood uses renewable resources, requires little energy to produce and distribute, and produces little waste.

The movement toward green building is gaining momentum, and is likely to fundamentally transform the residential construction supply business.

I'm especially proud of the quality and usefulness of the information in this issue. But it's only a start.

The real work is up to you.