

STATUS CHECK 2010: WHAT SHADE OF GREEN ARE WE NOW?

Jennifer O'Connor
FPInnovations
2665 East Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1W9

In this presentation addressing the role of wood in environmental certification systems in the construction sector, the author suggests a series of recent trends are worth noting in the continuously evolving world of “sustainable design.” Environmental issues have increasingly dominated the dialogue in architecture over the past decade, with ramifications for wood that are leaning towards positive results. Wood manufacturers may wish to align promotional campaigns and R&D activities with the following trends.

The first and possibly most important trend is that architects are increasingly using wood in green design. Numerous built examples where wood was selected to help achieve green design goals suggest that concerns about North America forest management practices may be easing while environmental attributes of wood may becoming more widely recognized.

The second trend concerns the movement of life cycle assessment (LCA) towards the mainstream. This approach to scientifically assessing environmental footprint – a somewhat obscure discipline that produces good comparative results for wood – is working its way into the construction sector.

A third trend is the increasing importance of carbon. With heavy political and market interest in carbon, wood products are well-positioned to highlight the carbon portion of their overall environmental story, namely, the relatively light greenhouse gas (GHG) footprint of wood products plus their role as a long-term GHG storage vehicle.

The evolution of green programs and codes is a fourth trend with relevance to wood. LCA is now incorporated in the popular LEED green building program and the new International Green Construction Code; this will accelerate uptake of LCA and therefore potentially lead to market gain for wood products.

A fifth trend of interest is the emergence of so-called “red lists.” Participants in the green design arena with a desire to push the bar higher and also bring more definition to design guidance have established several lists of substances to be avoided. For example, the Living Building Challenge bans formaldehyde and wood preservatives with arsenic for any project seeking certification under this program.

The sixth trend is the development of green fatigue as a result of greenwashing. The practice of overstating green attributes (greenwashing) is rampant in the manufacturing sector. As a result, the audience is no longer listening, or is looking for suppliers that set themselves apart by delivering credible claims.

A seventh trend is the emergence of leading-edge manufacturers who are performing LCA and communicating this data. An increasingly sophisticated audience is receptive to manufacturers demonstrating a commitment to sustainability principles. LCA data is being brought to market through Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs).

The eighth trend is a global uptake of EPDs. This ISO-compliant, rigorous, LCA-based approach to documenting environmental footprint takes the guesswork and the greenwash away for consumers looking to make a green selection. A subset of this data could appear as an on-product label. Wood products will benefit from this direct-to-market communication of environmental data.

A potential ninth trend is the development of monetized carbon credits for wood. The two-fold carbon benefits of wood (avoided GHG emissions when wood substitutes for other materials and stored GHG in the form of carbon within the wood itself) could perhaps be negotiable in carbon offset markets.