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Can green-certified lumber make it?

- From the June 24, 2002 issue of High Country News by Jane Braxton Little



GREEN MARKET

ADVOCATE: A Collins Pine forester looks at trees in a mixed-species, uneven-aged stand in California (Jane Braxton Little photo)

Some foresters say environmental management doesn't reap extra profit

BRANSCOMB, Calif. - Art Harwood spent several million dollars and many months in the mid-1990s to certify his sawmill for producing "green" lumber from responsibly managed forests of redwood and Douglas-fir. It was an investment he believed would yield financial returns later.

"Later's come, but the returns haven't," Harwood says now.

He's one of many sawmill and forest owners across the country who are wondering when they will reap economic advantage from opening their woods, mills and pocketbooks to the systems of forest certification (HCN, 5/8/2000: After the fall). So far, most have not earned higher prices for their products.

"It's done nothing but cost us money," says the president of Harwood Products, which employs about 270 people, turning out 130 million board-feet of lumber per year, in the coastal hills north of San Francisco. "I suppose someday there may be some economic benefits, but I don't know that."

Despite the dearth of direct financial returns, forest certification is booming. Since 1993, when the Forest Stewardship Council began promoting responsible forestry in the United States, 92 forests - totaling nearly 9 million acres - and 452 sawmills have passed the program's rigorous standards.

Two groups, Scientific Certification Systems and SmartWood, use FSC standards to certify land management, and chain of custody practices once the logs reach the sawmill. The FSC-certified forests range from small plots in private ownership to Pennsylvania's 2.1 million acres of state forest.

To be FSC-certified, forest management must be "ecologically, socially and economically sustainable," says Ian Hanna at the Certified Forest Products Council office in Portland, Ore.

That means forest owners must pay for teams of experts to review their timber harvests, soil and water quality, make allowances for wildlife, biodiversity, and planning for sustained employment. Sawmill owners must pay for reviews of their practices and show they keep logs from certified forests separated from other logs.

A parallel certification system developed by the timber industry - the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, sponsored by the American Forest and Paper Association - has put its stamp of approval on at least 45 million acres in the United States. Although the industry standards are still not as high as those set by the FSC, they have toughened somewhat and they indicate certification has become a prerequisite to survival, says Richard Donovan, former director of SmartWood.

"We're not tilting at windmills anymore," Donovan says. "People are talking about it everywhere."

Finding customers

More than one-tenth of the 500 million acres of commercial forest land in the U.S. is now certified by one of the two leading systems. There has been progress gaining recognition in the marketplace, though only an estimated 2 to 5 percent of all wood products in the country is now FSC-certified, Hanna says.

Since 1999, when Home Depot, the country's largest wood products retailer, began giving preference to FSC-certified lumber, the number of certified companies supplying Home Depot has jumped to two dozen, says company spokesman John Simley.

Other major retailers giving preference to FSC-certified products include Lowe's, the second-largest home-improvement chain, and Andersen Corporation, the leading manufacturer of wooden windows and patio doors.

But the bottom line is that most sawmills report little difference between what they receive for certified and non-certified products, a washout that includes veneer, paneling and plywood. The retailers they sell to, as well as the consumers who are the end buyers, are rarely willing to pay more for the certified logo.

Home Depot displays the FSC logo on all wood products grown on sustainable forests, but does little more to distinguish them from the rest of the stock. And it does not charge more.

"If we're going to make this work, the price must be transparent to the consumer," Simley says.

Although the public supports the idea of sustainable forestry, people buying wood generally choose certified lumber only if it is the same price as non-certified stock, says Donovan, now chief of forestry

for Rainforest Alliance, an international nonprofit. In this sense, he admits, "Our message to consumers hasn't gotten through yet."

Green buildings offer hope

Most of the country's certified lumber is invisible, sold with no acknowledgment of the special efforts that went into it.

With few economic benefits to show for conscientious forest management - and the additional expenses to maintain it - Donovan and other leaders of the certification effort worry that forest and sawmill owners will drop out.

But it's a mistake to think of certification only in economic terms, says Robert Hrubes, senior vice president of Oakland, Calif.-based Scientific Certification Systems. He re-emphasizes the goals of protecting ecosystems and reducing the use of clear-cutting and pesticides.

And there can be subtle economic benefits. Forest and sawmill owners who get certified are gaining an edge on their competitors, which shows in Home Depot's preference. Harwood, too, sees that advantage: "I see certification as market share, and market share is king," he says.

An Oregon-based company, Collins Pine Co., is betting \$25 million on the green market share. Collins Pine is replacing a 59-year-old sawmill with a new one on the strength of the company's 94,000-acre Almanor tract in northeastern California - the first forest to be certified in North America.

Acclaim for its forest management has helped Collins Pine survive the toughest lumber market in decades, says Wade Mosby, a vice president at company headquarters in Portland.

Home Depot, which has been selling certified CollinsWood for several years, would never have dealt with the relatively small timber company without certification, Mosby says. "We get preference because of certification. It is our survival for the long run."

Another ray of hope comes in the trend of governments, universities and other large institutions willing to pay for so-called "green buildings" - which are designed from the ground up to be friendly to the environment. Already city governments in Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles and Berkeley, Boston, Atlanta, and Austin, Texas, are budgeting for green buildings, says Hanna of the Certified Forest Products Council.

"We're at a point of change," Hanna says, and soon there will be a noticeable increase in the number of customers willing to pay more for certified forest products. Those businesses that are already certified will be positioned to ride an upswing of demand and price.

That's what Harwood hopes for. Meanwhile, he takes satisfaction in knowing that with his FSC certification, he is contributing to improved forest ecosystems. "I feel strongly that the Earth's forests

could be managed better. We're just doing our share."

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