Among the 100-year-old redwoods at Big Creek Lumber in California are the saplings that will provide wood for the future. To have its 10,000 acres certified, Big Creek selectively harvests trees of varying ages.

The Forest for the Trees

Coming soon to the local home center: wood stamped with an environmental seal of approval

BY JEANNIE HUBER

The sugar pine lumber that rattles down the conveyor belts at the Collins Pine sawmill in Chester, California, amid the loud crunching of a debarking machine and the whining of a 9-foot band saw, looks, smells, and feels like ordinary wood. But it is, in fact, "certified" timber—having come from a forest managed according to strict environmental standards set by the Forest Stewardship Council, a nonprofit watchdog organization based in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Such "green" lumber has been available for nearly a decade, ever since Collins became the first company in the United States to gain F.S.C. certification. But until recently it's been a specialty product, finding shelf space only at stores like the Environmental Home Center in Seattle and

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTY FORSYTH

Saplings are growing out of a stump that's been covered with a layer of slash, debris from timbering. Loggers used to burn slash, but regional regulations now require that they break it up and spread it over the ground to provide nutrients and control erosion.

EcoTimber of Berkeley. Today, however, shoppers in some areas can walk into an ordinary home center and buy certified wood at the same price as noncertified wood.

Home Depot, the world's top lumber retailer, triggered this sweeping change when it announced as part of its 20th-birthday celebration in August 1999 that it would go out of its way to stock certified wood products. Specifically, the home-improvement retailing giant pledged to shift its business as fast as possible to suppliers whose wood bears the check-marked tree logo of the F.S.C. "We wanted to be a catalyst," says Home Depot spokesman John Simley. "And the market seems to be responding."

In the months since, the nation's number-two home-improvement retailer, Lowe's Home Centers, made a similar announcement, as did Menard's, 84 Lumber, and similar chains. Big players in other parts of the lumber business, from home-building giant Kaufman & Broad to window manufacturer Andersen Corporation, also promised to seek certified lumber. Suddenly, what had been a niche product with sluggish sales has become a hot commodity.

Increasing the demand for responsibly harvested lumber (and thereby curbing rapacious logging practices) was just what the international group of foresters, environmentalists, and community members had in mind when they met in Toronto in 1993 to form the F.S.C. They created a system that uses the buying power of consumers as leverage against the natural inclination of some lumber companies to turn a short-term profit at the expense of the forest's long-term health.

The F.S.C.'s program has three key components. First, it requires forest-products companies to follow 10 fundamental principles, such as limiting harvests in particular areas to the amount of wood that actually grows there each year and managing forests so they support local economies—making sure, for example, that milling is done locally. National and regional "working groups" of foresters, environmentalists, and community members determine how those principles will be implemented and then codify them into regional standards. Second, the F.S.C. accredits independent inspection agencies, such as Scientific Certification Systems and Rainforest Action Network's SmartWood program, to conduct annual inspections that include checking the books and

PROTECTING THE PRISTINE

At the 1998 Western Wood Products Association convention in San Francisco, members of the Rainforest Action Network (R.A.N.) scaled the St. Francis Hotel, hung a giant protest sign, and then remained suspended from the building until police climbed up to arrest them. The R.A.N., an activist organization that helped found the Forest Stewardship Council, sees certification as the best tool available for insuring good forestry on commercial land. But in pristine (never logged) forests, the R.A.N. often works to keep *any* chain saws away, even those wielded by certified timber companies. "The United States has already lost 96 percent of its old-growth forests," says Mike Brune, campaigns director for the R.A.N. "We can't afford to lose any more." —*J.H.*

walking the forests to make sure that each company is living up to the regional standards established by the working groups. And third, to guard against having uncertified lumber being sold as if it were certified, the F.S.C. insists on a "chain of custody," a system that tracks the wood as it moves from forest to mill to wholesaler—and even, in cases where the lumber is not ink-stamped, to the retailer.

Certification is often construed as a ban on clearcuts or a way to protect old-growth trees. But these shorthand descriptions are inaccurate. The F.S.C. doesn't prohibit clearcuts, as long as they are small (less than 20 to 40 acres, depending on the type of forest) and appropriate for the type of trees being grown. Neither does it automatically ban the felling of old-growth trees, although it does preserve stands of untouched or lightly cut old-growth forest. Says David Arens, the F.S.C.'s marketing director in the United States: "F.S.C. is not about 'Save the trees.' It's about 'Use the forests wisely.'"

To show the impact certified forestry can have on the forest itself, Dennis Gomez, the sawmill supervisor for Collins Pine, invites a visitor to hop into his truck for a quick tour of a 96,000-acre forest near Chester, much of which has been owned by the Collins family since the early 1900s. After passing a thick grove of young pines about as tall as telephone poles, the result of aggressive timber cutting by another company, he slows down at the point where the landscape changes abruptly. Here, firs and pines soar nearly twice as high, and they're ringed by sturdy young offspring of various heights. This is land that Collins has been logging since 1941.

People think that cutting individual trees is best for the forest, but clearcutting can mimic the action of a natural forest fire and provide the direct sunshine some trees need.

At that time, foresters calculated that this forest had 1.5 billion board feet of standing timber. Since then, loggers have selectively removed 2 billion board feet of lumber and kept 200 people employed year round in the company's sawmill. Yet the land still holds 1.5 billion board feet of timber, and it still looks like a real forest, with towering trees, clear streams, black bear, and bald eagles. In other words, Collins's long and responsible stewardship of its lands has enabled both loggers and habitat to flourish.

When Collins decided to pursue certification in 1992, the F.S.C. found no major deficiencies in the logging operations, although they did suggest that the company leave more dead and broken-off trees in order to give woodpeckers and owls more places to nest. But the certification effort also pointed out that the company's aerial surveys of its 126,000-acre hardwood forest in Pennsylvania were woefully out of date, and that contract loggers there were sometimes hauling logs straight down hillsides, a practice that contributes to erosion. Consequently, Collins hired an extra forester and spent about $175,000 on new aerial photographs and a geographic information system (GIS) to better track tree growth.

In Collins's California forest, the high-tech GIS system has helped managers solve a problem caused by decades of selective harvesting: Its expanses of ponderosa pine and sugar pine near Chester are being taken over by white fir—a more shade-tolerant but lower-value tree, and not the type historically dominant in that forest. So, for the first time, the company is planning to cut

THE TREE AMIGOS

The Forest Stewardship Council certifies tropical timberland worldwide, from Belize to Zimbabwe. In fact, concerns about shortsighted logging practices laying waste to equatorial forests are the foundation of the entire movement. Tim Synnott, outgoing director of the F.S.C., vividly recalls a 1993 trip to Bolivia that spurred him to action. Standing in the Chimanes forest, a local logger explained his plan to first cut all the mahogany out of the area, then lay off his workers, close his sawmill, and put his profits in the bank—so he could watch his money earn a "sustained yield." The statement stunned Synnott. "It was the most horrible mockery of the idea of sustainable forestry."

In the eight years since it was founded, the F.S.C. has certified more than 6 million acres in the tropics—more than a third of it located in Bolivia (ABOVE). Although this represents less than 1 percent of all tropical timberland, Synnott points out that any progress is significant. Compared to Europe and North America, certification in these areas is a time-consuming process, he says.

Consumers can help the effort, he says, by purchasing lesser-known certified woods. Not only does this practice support F.S.C.-approved logging methods that maintain a natural balance of forest species but the homeowner gets flooring of rugged *machiche* and moldings of brindled *chakte kok*. — *Ryan Robbins*

2- to 5-acre blocks of trees—not just those ripe for harvest—in order to let more sunlight reach the forest floor and encourage more pines to sprout.

People often think of cutting individual trees as "the type of logging that creates the least disturbance," says Bill Wilkinson, the F.S.C.'s head forester in the United States. But it means that, in time, only shade-loving trees will be left. "If you're not already managing a shade-tolerant species, eventually you will be." This is why he advocates a broad mix of harvesting programs, which go by names such as "variable-retention cut," "seed-tree cut," and "shelterwood cut." In Douglas fir forests, for instance, small clearcuts are warranted because they mimic the way windstorms and mudslides would clear an area naturally. And without a clearing, there's no way to get these trees to thrive. "The cuts can be an acre or two, maybe ten acres," Wilkinson says. "You don't have to turn the forest into a moonscape."

Along with the Forest Stewardship Council's check mark logo, the ink stamp on a piece of certified wood indicates the board's origins. Like the code on a bottle of aspirin, the markings allow the product to be traced back to the forest where it was cut, a system known as chain of custody.

The F.S.C. is not the only program concerned with forestry practices in the United States. In 1994, one year after the F.S.C.'s founding, the American Forest & Paper Association, an industry trade group, established its Sustainable Forestry Initiative (S.F.I.), a competing certification program. The industry effort is much less restrictive than that of the F.S.C. For example, the S.F.I. allows clearcuts averaging as large as 120 acres, three times the maximum allowed by the F.S.C. And while the F.S.C. allows companies only limited use of pesticides, the S.F.I. simply obliges companies to obey the laws regarding pesticides.

Derek Jumper, a spokesman for the S.F.I., says that later this year, the group will come out with its own label. And the industry program, which until recently had no provision for independent on-site inspections, has now made them optional and has plans to require third-party inspections for any company that wants to market its wood with the S.F.I. logo.

Still, the S.F.I. has no chain-of-custody system. "We believe the tracking is not necessary," says Jumper. "If there's a piece of wood with 'S.F.I.' on one end and 'International Paper' emblazoned across the front, it will be clear that it was brought to market by a company that abides by S.F.I. standards." But the lack of any means to trace the wood is a serious shortcoming, according to Jeff Wartelle, director of strategic programs for the Forest Certification Council, an organization trying to increase demand for certified lumber. "What assurance is there that the wood you're buying is really from a well-managed forest?" Wartelle asks.

While the S.F.I. has enrolled a massive 72 million acres in its program, so far it has failed to win much retail support. In reference to S.F.I., Home Depot's John Simley says, "We looked at their program, and we decided that the best system was the F.S.C.'s."

The chief problem for the F.S.C. now is supply. At the start of this year, it had certified just 7.8 million acres in the United States, hardly enough to meet the huge demand for lumber in this country. Although many small suppliers have become certified, the lumber is hard to find in the quantities that big retailers need. At Home Depot, for instance, Simley won't hazard a guess as to when certified wood will dominate the store's shelves. Richard Donovan, chief forester and director of SmartWood, says his biggest fear is that people will give up too easily on certified lumber if they don't find it on the shelves at their local home center. "It's a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation," he says. "Only if people ask for this wood will builders and stores figure it out and say, 'Oh, this is important.' The sooner consumers ask those questions, the sooner the forests will be healthier." ■