WOOD DESIGN & BUILDING®

celebrates the design and construction qualities of wood.

Wood Design & Building covers the use of wood as a design and construction material in the U.S., Canada and around the world. We welcome your editorial comments, ideas and submissions.

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Why is LEED so tough on wood?

The idea of "Green Building" or "Sustainable Building" is gaining support by designers, builders and governments, and new Green Building programs are popping up all over North America. This has been helped by the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design [LEED™].

The concept of green buildings recognizes that all construction has some effect on the environment. Green building favors choices in design and materials that reduce consumption of energy, use of non-renewable materials and pollution.

LEED™ has emerged as the rating system for deciding what buildings essentially qualify as green. It is a noble effort but one that is not kind to wood. First of all, it recognizes only one sustainable forestry certification system – that of the Forest Stewardship Council [FSC]. Secondly, it gives little crefit for the use of wood, even FSC-certified wood.

To take the first point, there are five sustainable forestry standards from recognized organisations available to forest companies in the U.S. and Canada.[1] In some regions, for example the northern Canadian forests that make up the largest area in the world certified under non-FSC sustainable forestry standards, the FSC has not yet developed any standards. Thus LEED™ does not recognize wood from these vast regions as being certified.

Recognizing FSC-only certified wood also discriminates against small woodlot owners who have managed their forests well for years under the American Tree Farm Program but find the cost of FSC certification not recoverable in the price they get for their products.

As for giving little credit to wood even if certified, LEED™ seems to hold wood to a higher standard than steel or concrete. Steel is recognized as green based on recycled content but neither it nor concrete are required to account for the higher energy use and pollution generated in their manufacture.

Wood, in contrast, is a renewable product having low embodied energy and pollution emissions, and improves environmental performance over the life of a building. Such has been demonstrated by the Athena® Sustainable Materials Institute's [www.athenasmi.ca] software[2] to evaluate building systems using life-cycle analysis.

LEED™ is still new and evolving. However, life-cycle analysis is a major criterion for green buildings that LEED™ should incorporate. It should also give more credit for using wood certified under all recognized sustainable forestry standards, not just the FSC.

Don Griffith, editor

1 Sustainable forestry standards include: [ISO 14001] International Organization for Standardization, www.iso.ch; Canadian Standards Association [CSA]; www.csa-international.org/certification/forestry; Sustainable Forestry Initiative® [SFI], www.aboutsfi.org; American Tree Farm System [ATFS], www.treefarmsystem.org/treefarm/index.htm; and the Forest Stewardship Council [FSC]; http://fscus.org.

2 The Canadian Wood Council used the Athena® software to conduct a life-cycle analysis comparison of similar wood, steel and concrete buildings. The results are published in the bulletins "Comparing the Environmental Effects of Building Systems", and "Life Cycle Analysis for Residential Buildings", found at www.cwc.ca/environmental, and click on "bulletins".