

## DOVETAIL EDITORIAL

# KEEPING WOOD GREEN

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Perhaps the biggest mistake consumers make is to seek change for change's sake, especially in the name of environmentalism. For years the steel industry's mantra has been "Save a tree, buy steel" and now similar claims are being made with hemp, kenaf, bamboo, and agricultural residues. At "green" conferences and tradeshow, these materials are promoted with the sincere assumption that virtually anything is better than the "merciless slaughter" currently envisioned in our forests. Yet blind alignment behind wood substitutes, without investigation into their production details, contributes to a jaundiced view of the green movement, ignores the many ways in which an undermining of wood's position in the economy does more harm than good, and denies the many opportunities for wood to be a leader in the green marketplace.

There are several key issues that need to be considered. First, wood is the major industrial raw material in the U.S. today, equating to approximately as much volume as the next three primary industrial raw materials (steel, concrete, and oil) combined. Any substitution of wood would require an increase in the use of an alternative material by a significant order of magnitude.

Second, agricultural expansion is by far the number one reason for deforestation globally. Until the early part of the twentieth century the United States cleared 2.1 acres of forestland for every individual added to the population, and this linear relationship was remarkably consistent for the previous three hundred years of American History. It wasn't until after the development of industrial agriculture in general, and the tractor specifically, that this trend abated and agricultural land expansion halted in the U.S. Any significant substitution of an agricultural product for a forest product may tip the current delicate balance of land use, meaning the additional agricultural land must come from somewhere, and historically it has come from forests.

Third, wood is the only significant industrial raw material that can be produced while maintaining the natural system that generates it. Substituted products do not provide the same societal benefits as forests. Wood is naturally renewable. Forests are one of the most efficient means of harnessing solar energy to reduce carbon dioxide in the air, increase oxygen in the air, protect clean water, and produce material usable by people for a virtually infinite range of products. The opportunity to meet human needs without diminishing the natural resource does not exist for alternative materials.

Unfortunately, there are no silver bullets in environmentalism. As good as wood is, forestry science and forest stewardship are still limited by human capacities. The earth's natural systems are a vast and complex series of mechanisms that are inter-related and poorly understood. Much of this complexity is self-regulating, although over time periods well beyond human life spans. Evidence suggests that most people not only have difficulty projecting outcomes beyond their own life span, but actually have planning

horizons of two years or less. To a certain extent this short-term view explains people's inability to understand the long-term consequences of their actions.

One attempt to protect wood's role in the economy is the use of forest certification as a means to provide a baseline for what constitutes responsible forest stewardship and to assure consumers that wood is an environmentally friendly choice. However, environmental marketing is not a new concept, and forestry is coming late to a party that has a few well-established rules.

Environmental messages must be simple, clear, come from *completely believable sources* and define exactly what people can do today to achieve long-term benefits. People do not base purchasing decisions on long-term, indirect and only partially probable implications.

Any conflict between wood certification systems, in which one system discredits the other, discredits wood as a whole. This conflict leads to substitution. Consumers currently think a plastic deck is better than a redwood deck. The marketplace needs to hear a consistent common message in order for consumers to be part of the solution.

Finally, the market for "green" products is growing at a significantly faster pace than other economic measures. The "green consumers" (e.g. cultural creatives), and those they directly influence represent from 14% to 30% of the market. So why the reality of the constant lament, "nobody is asking for certified wood?" Clearly one answer to this is the recognition that individual awareness levels are extremely low even within organizations that actively support certification much less, without, in the population at large.

The key is to recognize that *it is not only what these consumers actively seek that is important, but also what they are avoiding!* Consumers find it difficult to believe that wood can be a green product, and they doubt that the wood industry is a trustworthy messenger in the green marketplace. This distrust is the basis of the very recognizable willingness of a significant percentage of the market to jump to wood substitutes, almost at the drop of a hat, regardless of the lack of validity of the claims of the alternate material. It is why the mantra, "save a tree, buy *almost anything else*" is so effective. It is one reason certification was developed in the first place. It is also why we must recognize that certification is still a "desired state" of trust, and any weakening in the system designed to engender that trust potentially eliminates it.

Maybe it is only progress that leads us to plastic laminate floors and vinyl siding. Maybe eucalyptus and bamboo are the solutions to all our wood needs. But if so I, and many consumers, will miss clear vertical grain cedar siding and hard maple flooring; and I'll regret the new possibilities missed that certification might have nurtured.