

EIGHT-PENNY NEWS

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Eastern Lumber Heads West

by David Dobbs

Don't look now, but you *might* have recently switched one of your most basic lumber products — 2x4s and 2x6s — from western to eastern lumber. Particularly across the Southeast and Midwest, changes in quality and price have driven lumberyards to replace western and southern sticks with eastern spruce-pine-fir 2x4s and 2x6s. The strange twist to this story is that some dealers aren't telling customers they've switched framing lumber, despite generally good results.

"It's not a concern about quality," says one Michigan lumberyard owner, who quietly made the switch to eastern s-p-f in 1992. "We've checked with the builders, and they've had good results. But some builders have prejudices about



Stepped-up production by Canadian mills is bringing good-quality eastern s-p-f framing lumber onto the market at competitive prices.

eastern lumber. So I don't tell unless they ask."

The main reason dealers are switching to eastern s-p-f is price: Eastern s-p-f now holds a 5% to 15% advantage in most areas east of the Mississippi, primarily because the Canadian mills that make

most of it have dramatically boosted production — up 19% in 1992 and another 20% last year. Western and southern U.S. production, meanwhile, have slowed because of declining timber reserves, environmental restrictions, and poor harvest-

ing weather in the South.

Eastern lumber has also improved in quality, both perceived and actual. Its biggest gain came in 1991, when the old system of lumber grading, which showed eastern s-p-f to be significantly weaker than western or southern framing lumber, was replaced by the more accurate In-Grade system, which showed strength differences between the three species to be marginal. Eastern's "weak lumber" label no longer held.

In addition, analysts say, mill improvements and better quality control have improved s-p-f's consistency, at least among the better mills. "It's not that this stuff is that great," says one midwestern dealer. "But with western getting worse and more expensive, the price makes the decision *continued*

If You Can Hear This, You Need Earmuffs

If you think the job site has been getting quieter every year, it's probably because you're losing your hearing. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has named hearing loss a "silent epidemic" in America's workplace.

A study of over a million construction workers in British Columbia showed that the vast majority lost a significant portion of their hearing during their working

lives. Hearing loss tends to be greatest in the high-frequency ranges, making it hard to understand speech. The decline in hearing also accelerates as the years go by: After 15 years on the job site, carpenters in British Columbia had lost an average of 28 decibels at 4,000 hertz. Studies in Sweden show a similar pattern: While 85% of 20-year-old construction workers had

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Proper use of hearing protection can prevent the major hearing loss suffered by most construction workers.

CAROLYN BATES



Electronic circuitry from Johnson Controls of Milwaukee, Wis., will allow thousands of homes to adjust their power use automatically in response to variable electric rates.

25,000 Homes Get Smart Power

American Electric Power, one of the nation's largest electric utility holding companies, plans to install "intelligent" electric power control systems in 25,000 customer homes in six states. The programmable systems will adjust home electricity use based on the cost of power,

which the company varies depending on demand.

Known as the Transtext Advanced Energy Management System, the system includes an intelligent electric meter, a modem, a water heater controller, a pool pump controller, and a "smart" thermostat/controller for the heating

and cooling system and small appliances. The modem brings information about the electric rate to the controller, and also allows the power company to read the meter remotely. The homeowner instructs the smart thermostat how to respond to different energy prices. For instance, residents can set their air conditioners to keep the house at 70°F when the electric rates are low, let the temperature rise to 75°F when the price is medium, and to 80°F when the price is critical.

To help users decide what energy choices to program in, the Transtext thermostat monitors the home's power consumption and can display an updated cost record or project the effect of changed settings on monthly bills. The utility hopes the system will encourage consumers to shift their power usage to off-peak periods. □

Eastern Lumber, continued

sion for you. Why pay extra when you can get the equivalent out east?"

Jim McBride, who buys lumber and other materials for Renaissance Housing, a new home firm in Reston, Va., concurs. He started getting eastern lumber in some of his shipments two years ago, and is accepting of the change. "You get bad batches now and then," he says, "but you can compensate for that. To me, it's a good thing overall because it makes the whole field more competitive."

According to industry analysts and lumber dealers, the quality of eastern s-p-f can vary significantly between mills. So for a contractor, the key is finding a lumberyard that has found a good mill. If that's the case, using eastern 2x4s or 2x6s probably won't mean a big compromise. And it will save you money, at least as long as present prices hold.

Still, some suppliers and builders remain unconvinced. Skip Fogg of Fogg's Hardware and Building Supplies, in Norwich, Vt., caters mainly to custom contractors in an upscale New England market. Eastern lumber has always been available here, but Fogg says he can't sell much of it because the quality still doesn't compare with the western material he stocks. "You can ask any contractor in the area," he said. Smaller trees account for the lower quality, Fogg believes, adding, "The quality of both eastern and western wood has been dropping every year."

Fogg says the price of eastern s-p-f shadows the price of the western lumber, maintaining a consistent 10% to 15% gap to attract buyers for the younger wood. □

David Dobbs writes on environmental and building subjects from Montpelier, Vt.

Foam Finds Use as Lightweight Backfill

For years, expanded polystyrene foam has been used to insulate foundations. But residential builders may not know that foam can also be used for backfill where heavier materials might cause excessive soil subsidence.

In Syracuse, N.Y., builders backfilled an entire mall complex with 40,000 cubic yards of foam, enough to make a pile 60 feet wide, 30 feet high, and 600 feet long. The foam was trucked to the site in 2x4x8-foot billets, and two-man teams muscled it into place around the mall complex's 18-foot-deep basement. The foam was stacked to a depth of 13 feet around the foundation, then capped with a 4-inch concrete slab. Three feet of compacted fill and topsoil was added to finish the grade.

The unconventional strategy was dictated by the deep layer of soft glacial soil underlying the site. Engineers called for the foam backfill because the weight of ordi-

nary soil or gravel would have compressed the soft subsoils around the structure's perimeter, causing the mall's slab foundation to warp at the edges. □

MEUSER RUTLEDGE CONSULTING ENGINEERS



Large polystyrene blocks placed as lightweight backfill around this suburban Syracuse mall reduced the settling of the unstable soils and prevented foundation problems.

STATE BY STATE

Connecticut. A proposed licensing requirement for contractors has died in a committee of the state legislature. The bill, proposed by the Department of Consumer Protection, would have required builders and remodelers to pay licensing fees and take qualification exams in order to do business in the state. A narrower measure, requiring contractors to register with the state but imposing no fees or exams, was passed as part of another bill.

New York. Workers compensation rates paid by New York employers have been lowered by 5.3%. The drop follows on the heels of legislation that eliminated surcharges paid by insurers to hospitals. Further declines are hoped for if the state's pilot managed care program is successful.

Massachusetts. Workers comp rates in the Bay State have dropped by 10.3%, the first decline in 22 years. Employers are expected to save more than \$200 million as a result of the change.

Vermont. The Vermont Housing Finance Agency is making an additional \$35 million available to low- and moderate-income homebuyers. Around 500 additional Vermonters should be able to purchase homes with the newly provided money. Applicants must have household incomes at or below \$36,100 for a one- or two-person household or \$41,500 for households of three or more. For information, call VHFA at 802/864-5743.

Appliance Specs by Fax — Instantly

What do you do if you need to know the rough-in dimensions of a dishwasher, but you can't wait all week — or even all day? That was the problem confronting Kirk Goddard one day a few years ago. Goddard, then a cabinet shop foreman, didn't get his specs on time. But he did invent a system that can get you yours instantly.

Goddard's idea for an automatic fax-back system to provide builders with

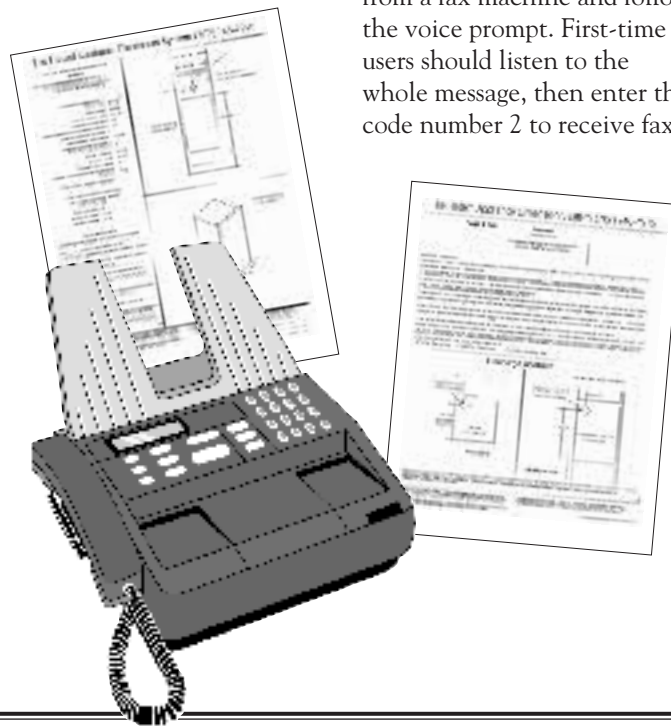
appliance specifications has grown into Dimension Express, a Benicia, Calif., automated response system that will send callers an immediate fax data sheet showing rough-in dimensions, duct location, gas and electrical requirements and locations, and other information needed for proper installation.

The 24-hour service is free to callers because the manufacturers pay for it. To use the system, dial 707/746-7975 from a fax machine and follow the voice prompt. First-time users should listen to the whole message, then enter the code number 2 to receive fax

instructions on how to use the system. (To speak to a live person, call 707/746-7582.)

Dimension Express's Sherri Goddard says the first time a customer calls, it takes some time to work through the voice menu. But once you're used to the system, you can interrupt the recorded message and type in the six-digit code for the appliance model you're installing, and the computer will instantly begin sending your fax. She says the system is quite reliable: "We get thousands of calls for spec sheets daily, and only five or ten people a day call Customer Service with some kind of problem."

You can get the six-digit codes you need either by fax from the computer, or by ordering a catalog from Dimension Express. Now online with the system are ASKO, Broan, Dacor, Iron-A-Way, Jenn-Air, KitchenAid, Magic Chef, Scotsman, Thermador, U-Line, and Wolf. Manufacturers to be added soon include Creda, Frigidaire, Marvel, Miele, Russell Ranges, Sub-Zero, and Viking. □



Worried About OSHA Regs? Just Ask

What exactly does OSHA require? And how do you find out? Recent *JLC* stories about OSHA prompted some readers to write asking that question. The answer is surprisingly simple: OSHA offers a consultation service, separate from its inspection program, that employers can call with questions about safety and regulations.

The OSHA Consultation Project is mostly paid for by the federal government, but administered by the states.

Employers can get the phone number for the consultation project in their state from their area OSHA office (if the number is hard to find in the phone book, try directory assistance). Some questions regarding interpretations or explanations of OSHA standards can be answered over the phone. For a thorough consultation, a consultant will visit your job site. The consultations are confidential, so any safety problems or rule violations detected will not be reported to compliance

officers. In fact, even the name of the employer or firm requesting a consultation is kept confidential.

Even though most residential construction sites are never visited by OSHA inspectors, a confidential consultation still makes sense. A consultation with OSHA may help you identify safety risks you hadn't even thought about. And a record of having consulted may help prove your good intentions if an unforeseen accident does occur. □

FROM WHAT WE GATHER

A single model plumbing code is in the works. The Building Officials and Code Administrators (BOCA) says it is working with the International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO) and the Southern Building Code Congress International (SBCCI) to develop a model plumbing code acceptable to all three major code organizations. The groups hope to complete work in time for their national meetings this fall.

Complying with federal energy standards will be easier now that the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) has published a code version of its Standard 90.1. The 1992 Energy Act requires state building codes to conform to the ASHRAE energy performance standard by this October. The code language version of the standard can be ordered from Publication Sales at ASHRAE headquarters, 1791 Tullie Circle N.E., Atlanta, GA 30329; 404/636-8400.

A new standard subcontract form has been endorsed by three major construction industry organizations: The Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), the American Subcontractors Association Inc. (ASA), and the Associated Specialty Contractors (ASC). Together, the three groups represent more than 65 thousand construction

firms, so the new document will probably be widely used as a model on large construction projects.

The shift from plywood to oriented strand board (OSB) is continuing as plywood production declines nationwide. Western plywood production this year will be 3.2 billion sq. ft., down from 9.1 billion six years ago, according to the American Plywood Association, with total U.S. production sinking 600 million sq. ft. for the year. But OSB production will more than make up the difference, with total structural panel production expected to reach a record high of 32.2 billion sq. ft.

If you don't get enough excitement during the day from your construction business, now there's "The Construction Game." Players buy equipment, bid on jobs, and try to drive their competitors out of business while avoiding bankruptcy themselves. Contractor Dave Zimmerman, who invented the board game, put up his house to raise cash for the first production run of 5,000 games. Most of them were sold by Christmas, and Dave's ready to run off another 5,000. Spouses and friends of builders are the ones who buy the game, he says; the contractors themselves think it's too much like reality. You can order a copy for \$29.95 by dialing 206/251-3943. Hey, it's only a game, guys.

Steel Stud Maker Freezes Price Through January

Taking advantage of one of steel's strongest selling points — a stable supply at a stable price — HL Stud Corporation, manufacturer of the Carpenter's Steel Stud, says it has frozen the price of the new steel studs through at least January 1995.

Framing lumber prices are down sharply from last January's peak. But supply restrictions mean the price of wood is still volatile — lumberyards adjust their prices for studs weekly. And even after recent drops in wood prices, steel is still cheaper. At under \$2 apiece, non-load-bearing 8-foot steel studs were more than \$1 below wood studs in early June.

Some contractors have

shied away from steel framing because they would have to spend time adapting to new tools and techniques. But substituting the carpenter's steel stud for wood studs in non-bearing walls is quite simple. Tabs on the end of the studs allow them to be nailed or stapled to wood plates with the same hammers or pneumatic nailers carpenters are already used to.

The studs are light and easy to handle. And, being steel, they are uniformly straight and don't warp or shrink, minimizing screw-pop callbacks. "You're getting a straight wall," notes company president George Deffet. "Even at the same price, it's a heck of a deal. For \$1 off per stud, it's a tremendous deal."

The problem up until recently, says Deffet, has been availability. HL Stud is distributing the steel studs through lumber giants including Georgia-Pacific, Weyerhaeuser and MacMillan Bloedel. "We have around 300 distribution points across the U. S., and they distribute to 20,000 lumber dealers," said Deffet. But he says some dealers don't stock the product because they make less money on it than on wood: "Fifteen percent of \$2 is less than 15% of \$3."

So HL Stud is taking its case straight to the contractors. For \$29.95, the company will ship builders a "trial framing bundle" of eight studs, along with a demonstration video and a nationwide list of suppliers. "We pay the freight," explains Deffet. And he says builders who want the product but can't locate a nearby dealer should call the company direct: "We don't let anybody slide by.



Light, easy-to-use Carpenter's Steel Studs will be priced below \$2 through next January. Samples are available direct from the manufacturer.

We are on top of this thing like a duck on a June bug."

For information, contact HL Stud Corp., 2000 W. Henderson Rd., Suite 60, Columbus, OH 43220; 800/457-8837. □

Good News, Bad News from SBA

Anyone contemplating starting a business will soon hear the daunting statistic, "80% of small businesses fail within five years." But according to Small Business Administration (SBA) head Erskine Bowles, this truism is not really true. If "failure" is defined as "going out of business while owing money," only one in four businesses shutdowns are actually failures. The remainder of the 80% figure commonly cited, Erskine reports, includes successful businesses that are bought out by bigger companies, as well as large numbers of businesses which shut down for various reasons without actually owing money.

Many people who run small, part-time operations, for example, shut down their sideline when their main business takes off. And, says Erskine, many small businesses

that are started to take advantage of a single major event, like the Olympics, shut down as soon as the event is over.

These conclusions come from a study by Bruce Phillips, acting director of the SBA's Office of Economic Research, and Bruce Kirchhoff, professor of entrepreneurship at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Phillips and Kirchhoff took a closer look at why small businesses cease operations and found that the survival rate of small businesses is more likely to be 40% after six years. And for businesses that had early successes, like a growth in sales or employment, survival chances increased dramatically: Around two-thirds of those businesses continued to prosper.

That's the good news. The bad news for anyone starting a construction company is that contracting is much riskier than most businesses: Out of the sample Phillips studied, as few as one in four start-up contracting businesses were still around after six years.

To improve the chances of making it through the start-up phase, the SBA advises anyone launching a business to take the time to develop an effective, realistic business plan, and to get help from the SBA's community-based resource partners: the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), Small Business Development Centers, and Small Business Institutes. Erskine says skilled people in these organizations are eager to help small businesses start, grow, and survive. □

Hearing,
continued

normal hearing in both ears, by age 50 only 10% could hear normally in both ears.

A hearing protection program instituted by the Swedes has made a big difference. Swedish authorities report that in 1974, before the program began, only 35% of construction workers age 35 to 37 had normal hearing. After 20 years of a hearing protection program, that figure has risen to 50%.

American construction workers, however, haven't been observed systematically like their Canadian and Swedish counterparts. But Scott Schneider of the Center to Protect Workers' Rights, a research arm of the AFL-CIO labor union, says a recent hearing screening at the Roofers' National Convention found that only 22 of 76 workers tested had normal hearing in both ears after working an average of less than 20 years. If you have worked for years on a noisy job site, he said, your hearing has probably suffered.

AFL-CIO is advocating OSHA enforcement and other government action to deal with the problem. Asked what the individual could do for himself, Schneider said, "My first suggestion to anybody would be to get your hearing tested. There's no better motivator than finding out that your hearing is going."

Effective hearing protection devices range from simple, inexpensive foam earplugs to sophisticated earmuffs that are supposed to screen out loud machine noises, but allow speech and warning sounds to be heard. A good pair of hearing protection earmuffs can be had for around \$25 — a small price to pay for the pleasure of a quiet conversation. □

South Florida Condominium Is for the Birds

Housing developments often run afoul of environmental concerns because the building projects are said to threaten wildlife habitats. But in some South Florida communities, it's the wildlife that's threatening the housing. Condo projects here are actually providing habitat for the state's red-bellied woodpecker, a protected species. Building occupants are not pleased.

Residents of Huntington Lakes, a condominium near Del Ray Beach, Fla., have been awakened at dawn recently by the drumming sounds of woodpeckers digging holes in the foam-and-stucco exteriors of the buildings. Florida Audubon Society ornithologist

Herb Kale says the birds probably like the sound the foam makes. "They drum for courtship," says Kale. "They also like to bang on chimneys and transformers." Kale says a large polystyrene foam mockup of the Space Shuttle built as a tourist attraction in Florida

was rapidly defaced by woodpeckers who discovered that the foam structure was an ideal place to meet the opposite sex.

Of course, once a young woodpecker couple has hooked up, they need a place to live. Apparently, they like stucco. There are now woodpecker holes all over the Huntington Lakes buildings, occupied by the legally protected bird families.

The problem is compounded by starlings, who squat in empty woodpecker holes. Every spring, the starlings arrive before the woodpeckers and move into woodpecker holes, forcing the woodpeckers to excavate new nests.

Maintenance workers for the condominium have tried filling the nests with newspaper and patching with fresh stucco, but to no avail. The ever-optimistic woodpeckers just make a side entry and move back in. □

