

New England UPDATE

“Green” Lumber Expands Its Niche

Though born only three years ago, the “green-certified” lumber business in the Northeast has already entered a growth spurt that may soon put as many as 2 million acres of Northeast forestland under sustainable management practices — and make an ever-increasing volume and variety of environmentally certified lumber and wood products available to builders.

“There’s no question that it’s a growing movement,” says Eric Palola, a resource economist for the National Wildlife Federation who helps coordinate one of the major certification programs, the SmartWood Program, in the northeast U.S. “Though it’s still an experiment — and one much needed — the necessary connections are starting

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to form, and we’re getting a more solid loop of supply and demand.”

Closing this loop — that is, connecting a steady, reliable supply of certified wood to millers, manufacturers, and marketers who can sell the products to an informed public — has been the biggest challenge the certified wood market has faced so far. While many consumers and some contractors like the idea of using environmentally certified lumber, most have been unsure about which certification programs were legitimate and where they might buy certified products.

Young but eager. Some of that insecurity has been due to the immaturity of the market. It was only in 1993 that the environmentalists and the lumber industry agreed on a set of rigorous, worldwide standards — those maintained and enforced by the international Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) — that certification organizations could use to certify timber operations. The FSC, then, became the certifier of the certifiers.

In the four years since, the movement has gained considerable momentum, particularly on the West Coast and in the Northeast. The two main certifiers in the U.S., Scientific Certification Systems and SmartWood, began certifying operations in this region only in 1994 and 1996, respectively. Yet between the two of them, they’ve certified almost 1.2 million acres in the Northeast so far, and expect to certify another quarter- to a half-million or more by the end of this year.

Putting it on the shelves For builders, contractors, and many subs (particularly cabinetmakers and flooring specialists), this means a supply of wood that can answer consumers’ demands for



Keeping the logs moving while encouraging careful harvesting is the goal of two “sustainability certification” programs active in New England. These programs now certify almost 1.2 million acres in the Northeast, and may certify as much as 2 million acres within another year.

ecologically sound products. Certified operations in the Northeast are now producing cedar shingles, trim lumber, clapboards, veneers, and lots of flooring. In general, finding these materials takes a little work — though usually not more than a couple of phone calls.

Jack McNerny, owner of Atlantic Hardwoods in Portland, Maine, for instance, will ship his flooring anywhere. McNerny started his company in 1993 and soon began carrying certified flooring. “At first,” he says, “we just sold some now and then. Now we sell at least a couple of floors every week. It’s taking off pretty nicely.”

McNerny, as well as everyone else in the certified lumber business, hopes contractors will continue to call. Most of the demand for these products comes not directly from consumers, but from contractors who recognize certified lumber as a way to answer clients’ concerns about the environmental impact of building with wood. Thus it appears that as with so many other building products, success here will depend on informed contractors who sense which products will be right for which customers — and then make the sale.



For More Information

SmartWood Program

65 Bleecker St., 6th Floor
New York, NY 10012
212/677-1900; fax 212/677-1900
<http://www.rainforest-alliance.org>

SCS (Scientific Certification Systems)

Park Plaza Building
1939 Harrison St., Suite 400
Oakland, CA 94612-3532
510/832-1415; fax 510/832-0359
<http://www.scs1.com>


Good Wood Alliance

289 College St.
Burlington, VT 05401
802/826-4448; fax 802/658-4443
<http://www.goodwood.org/goodwood/>

Trimming a House — in Concrete

In the United States, concrete is generally looked upon as industrial grade material — fine for commercial buildings, but limited to utilitarian duty in residential work. So most concrete contractors, even those who have seen the wide uses to which concrete is put overseas, see few opportunities to do anything other than the usual basements, driveways, and sidewalks.

When concrete contractor Paul Carrara's daughter Shelly built her house in Middlebury, Vt., however, Paul, who's developed a reputation in 36 years of business as a man who could really work the mud, had a chance to put his creativity fully to work. Though stick-built, the house uses concrete in numerous ways throughout that are ordinarily reserved for wood or other materials — from the posts supporting the arbor, to the fireplace surround and counters, to strictly decorative touches like the young handprints set into the wood floor of the living room. These photos show some of the highlights.

Carrara is also building a new house of his own completely out of concrete, and expects to finish late this year. For information, contact J. P. Carrara and Sons of Middlebury, Vt., at 802/388-6363. 



The fireplace's stacked geometry dominates the living room. But several elements, including the fluting along the fireplace, the steps and strip of concrete leading toward the kitchen, and set-in pieces with children's handprints, scale the concrete work down.



This pebbly concrete work for flat surfaces, seen here in both the floor and the main kitchen counter, is a Carrara trademark. The effect is achieved by putting small stones in the bottom of a precast mold and then inverting, polishing, and sealing the piece once it sets.



Though some of the “standard” concrete items such as the stepped walkway (above left) are of stone, the concrete pillars of the arbor over the walkway, as well as the rather elegant geometry of the slabs leading to the doorway (above right), make it clear that concrete will play both structural and decorative roles at the house. The diagonals in both pillars and walk also establish a geometry that’s used throughout the interior.



Carrara didn’t go on autopilot when he did the foundation work, either. The foundation got a vertical corrugation that breaks up the scale of the wide expanse and contrasts in tone and texture with the house’s wood siding.

New England Economic Indicators

by Stanley Duobinis, NAHB

The United States saw total housing starts increase again in April due mainly to a surge in multifamily construction. In contrast, in the Northeast, total housing starts dropped to 137,000 (seasonally adjusted annual rate) from 148,000 in March. Reported housing starts in the Northeast continue to display the volatile pattern of sharp increases followed by sharp decreases seen during the past nine months, so that not much can be made of a particular month's number. However, averaging the monthly data shows a slow, steady improvement in the level of housing starts in the Northeast over the past 18 months. This reflects the improvement in job growth in the region that occurred after a very sluggish beginning to the recovery.

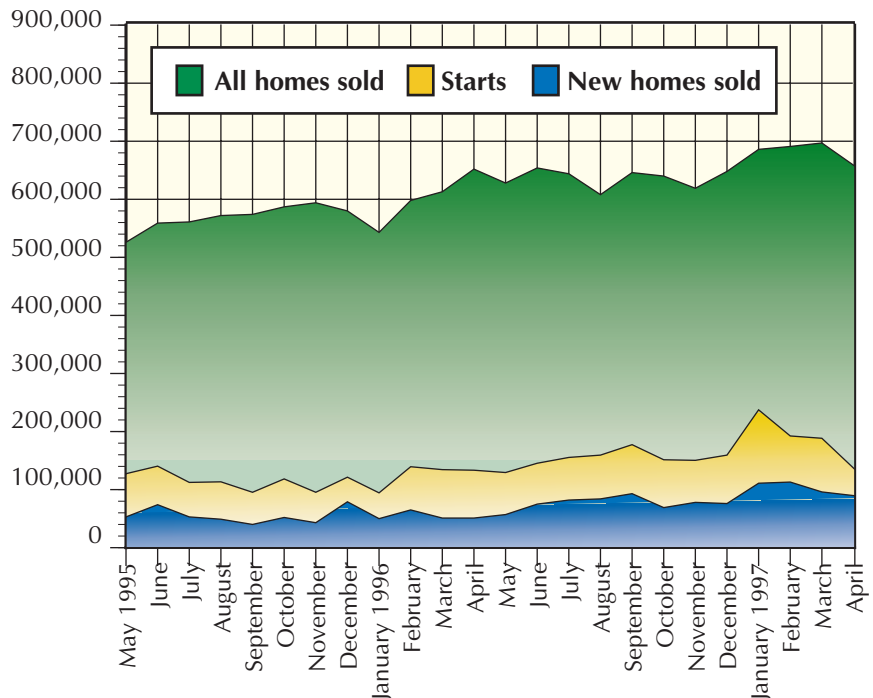
The increase in starts reflects stronger sales activity in the Northeast. New home sales rocketed past the 100,000 mark (annual rate) in January and February and dipped to 96,000 in both March and April. By contrast, new home sales in 1996 were only 74,000 units. Demand has grown because the economy of the region has improved and interest rates remain low. The combination has made home ownership much more attractive.

Total housing permits issued in April were down from their March level, suggesting that the high levels of activity that pre-

vailed during the first four months of the year will decline as the year progresses. While the Northeast probably had a fair amount of "pent-up" demand for housing, most of this demand has probably been exhausted, so that the level of construction will likely recede a bit as the year progresses.



Northeast Starts and Sales (seasonally adjusted annual rates)



Northeast Home Prices

