

SFI vs FSC

A wood certification battle with high stakes for dealers, builders and homeowners.

If you ever want to elicit groans from dealers, just mention FSC (*Forest Stewardship Council*). Dealers pay fees to obtain the FSC “Chain of Custody” certificate, and then they pay more fees to renew that certification. Now, if you think the dealer groans about FSC are loud, just mention FSC to builders. Since USGBC’s LEED standard accepts only FSC-certified lumber, builders are forced to buy it, often at a premium, to achieve the LEED lumber point. Typically, builders *overbuy* FSC lumber, mistakenly believing it’s required throughout the entire LEED job. Not true; see below.

Do you get a greener wood with FSC than with other reputable wood certification systems? Frankly, no. That’s one reason the SFI (*Sustainable Forest Initiative*) is fighting so hard for LEED recognition. The core of the problem is that USGBC considers SFI a so-called “industry-sponsored program”—and in the eyes of USGBC that somehow compromises SFI’s ability to protect forests. At press time, Building-Green.com reports that the new LEED wood certification draft language would allow for “multiple levels of compliance, and assigns half-credit, full-credit, or double-credit to programs based on the degree of compliance.” FSC of course gets access to the full point. Non-FSC standards would settle for less.

Outsiders may look at SFI’s battle for LEED acceptance as inconsequential. But that’s a misperception. If SFI attains LEED acceptance — through a proposed USGBC benchmark system—it will affect lumber costs for LEED projects, by driving them down through competition. It will also reduce fees to dealers for FSC *Chain of Custody* certificates. Plus, as SFI’s CEO Kathy Abusow recently pointed out

to me, SFI acceptance could bring recognition of *all* SFI-certified products to the LEED community, from paper to wood fiber of all types.

The Point of the MR7 Point

Today, the battle for LEED acceptance by SFI is focused on the so-called MR7 point. (Yes, I know that wood and wood fiber *may* also qualify for the MR 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, and 5.2 points, as well as the EQ 4.4 point.) Today, FSC has a monopoly on that LEED MR7 point. If a builder used wood certified by SFI, American Tree Farm, or CSA—to name just three—he would be ineligible for that point. To show you how crazy this has become, here’s a story for you: You could build a stone house and install a fixed cutting board from an FSC source and obtain *the same* wood-product point as a builder who pays for FSC lumber for a 10,000 square foot home. Plus, to obtain that LEED point, the builder has to prove that he’s bought the wood from a certified FSC Chain of Custody provider, which the dealer must pay to keep current.

The goal of LEED has been to create greener buildings, and it has succeeded in large part, especially in the commercial sector. Kudos to them, and I genuinely mean that. But does the freezing out of SFI (and other standards) foster greener, more-sustainably harvested lumber and wood fiber? No, it doesn’t.

The fact is, these so-called ineligible lumber standards achieve equitable results when compared to FSC. (Some argue that FSC is focused more on non-U.S.-based lumber and therefore is inherently compromised as a truly green standard by the carbon footprint of shipping wood products).

The 50% Rule

Let’s say that SFI fails to navigate the USGBC benchmarks for acceptance in the LEED standard. Well, in that case, here’s a misperception about LEED. The MR7 LEED point requires that more than 50% of the *value* (*not the quantity*) of permanently installed wood and wood fiber be FSC-certified. Some LEED builders have recognized this and they use non-FSC lumber for the framing (“legally” amounting to 49% of the wood value). Then they buy the higher-priced FSC wood products for, say, cabinets, built-ins, and floors, to comply with the MR7 rule. Even though that rule is public, it isn’t widely known, and I have met builders who bid out FSC certified products for every stick in the structure, and paid as much as 20% more for FSC lumber that they weren’t really required to use.

At the end of the day, I hope USGBC opens its wood certification system to other standards, as other green building standards have done. In my opinion, the FSC system does not demonstrably offer a greener wood product, and all the hoops that mills, distributors, dealers, and builders have to jump through just make it more expensive to build affordable homes. ■



The award-winning author of twelve books, and a frequent contributor to the industry’s leading trade magazines, JOHN D. WAGNER is a sought-after speaker on green topics at industry events. Contact him through www.JohnDWagner.com