



The Last Word

The attack by competing building products on the wood industry is bogus—and demands a response

By Tony Kryzanowski

The attack on the Canadian wood industry by competing building products over proposed changes to the National Building Code of Canada (NBCC) that would permit building all-wood structures higher than four storeys deserves an equal response because of the bogus claims being made.

The Canadian Concrete Masonry Producers Association (CCMPA) recently purchased full page ads in several Canadian daily newspapers, featuring a photo of the aftermath of an Oklahoma tornado with the headline “Wood First? First to go. Build with Concrete Block.”

I guess a photo of a recent earthquake disaster in Pakistan showing the death of many school children because the concrete roof collapsed on them would not have been appropriate. But that is why there is a big push in many earthquake prone countries to use wood trusses for roofs in their building construction, even in areas that traditionally have used concrete.

I found quotes from the CCMPA and the president of the Canadian Institute of Steel Construction in a newspaper article troubling, not so much as they relate to British Columbia’s Wood First policy, but with proposed changes to the NBCC. Added to that, the CCMPA has posted on its web site that: “These political policies are wholly self-indulgent. They limit and undermine the professional freedom and good judgment of a designer to choose the best material for the application. They undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the building codes. They legislate advantage, protection, and gain for one industry at the expense of others by interfering with market-driven forces and restricting fair and open competition.”

In making reference to another group attacking the Canadian wood industry—the Coalition for Fair Construction Practices—the Canadian Institute of Steel Construction president said in the article that “with this coalition, the construction industry is saying to governments that this isn’t right. We shouldn’t pick one material over the others. They all have their uses.”

Here are the facts as it relates to the NBCC as it currently stands and my response to the claim that changes to the NBCC favor one building material over another. It does, but it favors concrete and steel as it relates to buildings over four storeys. That’s because in 1941, the code adopted the concept of combustible versus non-combustible construction and limited building with all-wood to four storeys. So since then, the concrete and steel industries have gotten preferred treatment on multi-residential, commercial, and industrial buildings over four storeys.

What is being proposed within the 2015 NBCC is a performance—rather than a combustible—construction approach. The science clearly shows that with new construction guidelines and structural material such as cross-laminated timber as well as engineered wall and roofing systems, that it is now safe to build all-wood structures taller than four storeys—an approach that B.C. and Quebec have already adopted by allowing six storey construction.



The NBCC changes are being proposed largely due to the work done by the Network for Engineered Wood-based Building Systems (NEWBuildS), which consists of 23 university professors and 19 researchers from FPInnovations, the Construction Portfolio of the National Research Council and the Canadian Wood Council. Combined, they supervise about 70 graduate students and post-doctoral fellows from 12 Canadian universities.

What the concrete and steel industries fear more than anything else is competition from the wood industry, which will force them to be more cost competitive when bidding jobs and ultimately will result in better prices for building owners and consumers. By providing wood products with equal and fair access to designers for the construction of taller buildings, the concrete and steel industries know that the days of attaching a premium to buildings constructed from these building products because of a legislative cornering of the market could soon be over.

Finally, let's talk about the environmental impact of building with wood vs. concrete and steel.

Last year, both the Canadian Wood Council and the American Wood Council jointly released Environmental Production Declarations (EPDs) for softwood lumber, plywood, oriented strand board, and glue-laminated lumber.

What the release of EPDs on such a range of wood products means is that the wood industry can now definitively provide customers, importing countries, architects and designers with unbiased and third-party verified data concerning the environmental impact of manufacturing these forest products from the forest to the customer's door in Canada and the United States. It takes direct aim at the environmental impact of using steel and concrete in building construction compared to wood. In cases where a building's construction, life span, and disposal are important factors when projects are sent out to tender, the people who choose building materials will have the data they need for choosing wood products in various traditional and new structural applications as a better environmental alternative.

What makes the EPD process credible, compared to other third party certification schemes, is that the rules for developing an EPD are set out by the International Standards Organization (ISO).

So if the issue is fair market access, then it is obvious that it is the wood industry that is being discriminated against as the NBCC is currently written regarding construction of taller buildings.