



Forest industry takes important step to verifying its environmental impact—and taking on steel and concrete

By Tony Kryzanowski

May 7th was a red letter day for the Canadian forest industry.

On that day, 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. With Quebec recently joining British Columbia to allow wood construction of residential buildings up to six storeys, the timing couldn't have been better for the industry.

What the release of EPDs on such a range of wood products means is that the industry can now definitively provide customers, importing countries, architects and designers with unbiased and third-party verified data about the environmental impact of manufacturing these forest products from the forest to the customer's gate 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 to select wood products in various traditional and new structural applications as the better environmental alternative.

The five areas where the manufacture of these wood products were tested—by a third party group called Underwriters Laboratories Environment—were global warming potential, acidification potential, eutrophication potential, ozone depletion potential, and smog potential.

Now, it's often challenging to create excitement on topics that use words like 'eutrophication', which means a process where water bodies receive excess nutrients that stimulate plant growth—for example, when fertilizer leaches into a water body and creates an algae problem. But by now, most people have some understanding of the problem of global warming. New warnings about its devastating potential help to demonstrate the importance of making a greater effort to use more environmentally friendly products like wood in building construction.

Almost at the same time that the wood councils were releasing their EPDs, scientists announced that the amount of carbon dioxide trapped in the atmosphere, which is believed to be the leading cause of global warming, has passed a long-feared milestone of a daily average of over 400 parts per million. That is the highest it has been in an estimated three to five million years. Based on scientific estimates, the burning of fossil fuels has caused a 41 per cent increase in carbon dioxide since the Industrial Revolution.

So given this situation, which will very likely drive the conversation as it relates to global warming at least in the near term, it's important for the forest industry to do whatever it can to let consumers know that it is part of the solution, and not part of the problem. Using the EPDs to promote the industry's environmental record—particularly with the building community—is an important step in that direction for many reasons.



Among the most important is that it combats the serious problem of accusations of ‘greenwashing’ from the industry’s concrete and steel competitors. The act of green washing is making positive environmental claims and attaching labels without any scientific evidence or standardized testing to back the claim. Recently, experts put the number of ‘eco’ logos tied into third party certification schemes at around 600. 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). In other words, if the concrete and steel industries decide to also conduct EPDs, they will have to follow the same rules as were followed by the forest industry. As a result, architects and building designers will have an “apples to apples” comparison of how each industry’s manufacturing methods stack up as it relates to impact on the environment.

So, the question, once and for all, is: does the manufacture of wood products have a softer environmental impact than the manufacture of steel and concrete?

We don’t have a complete picture yet, but it looks promising. That’s because the steel and concrete industries have yet to produce EPDs for their manufacturing methods.

So, what’s the value of the exercise that the North American wood industry has just completed? Well, it is forcing building material competitors to prove their environmental claims—and the fact of the matter is that they will likely drag their feet to produce EPDs because they know they can’t win. The forest industry is betting, and betting correctly, that it will win every ISO, third party investigation on its impact on the environment.

So what’s the industry’s next step?

In addition to placing shiny EPD labels on bundles of 2X4’s, the wood products industry will likely earn more market share more quickly, especially in non-residential building construction, if it approaches building specifiers directly, who habitually use steel and concrete. They need to ask if their suppliers have conducted comparable ‘ISO’ testing of the environmental impact of their manufacturing processes.

An important follow-up question—now that we have a better understanding of how much carbon dioxide is building up in the atmosphere —might be: if they have not conducted testing, well, why not? And perhaps another question: What are they scared of?