

‘Wood First’ Movement Still Smoldering

To read more on each individual issue, visit –

Info on pine beetle infestation
<http://cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/subsite/mountainpinebeetle/home>

C-429 defeated
http://www.cssbi.ca/Eng/features/news_wood_first_c-429.shtml

BC Wood First
http://www2.news.gov.bc.ca/news_releases_2009-2013/2010FOR0160-001113.htm
<http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/mof/woodfirst/>

Quebec bill 490
<http://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/travaux-parlementaires/projets-loi/projet-loi-490-39-1.html>

Bill 3429 in Oregon
<http://www.leg.state.or.us/11reg/measures/hb3400.dir/hb3429.intro.html>

USDA action
<http://nafoalliance.org/featured/forest-owners-praise-vilsack-conservation-leadership-through-wood-use/>

http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?contentid=2011/03/0143.xml&navid=NEWS_REL_EASE&navtype=RT&parentnav=LATEST_RELEASES&edeployment_action=retrievecontent

Over the last several years, Canada’s wood industry had been the driving force behind a series of legislative initiatives created to absorb massive amounts of wood killed by the mountain pine beetle, and to pick up the slack caused by weaker U.S. demand.

These legislative proposals would impose new regulatory requirements that favor the use of wood in construction—removing the selection of materials from the purview of the designer, and handing a new market advantage to the wood industry.

Some of these proposals require that government entities assign wood preferred status as a building material for state-funded construction projects. Others mandate that a percentage of the wood used in a particular province originate from that province.

But perhaps most irresponsibly, some efforts seek changes in building codes to permit wood to be used to frame mid-rise buildings above four-stories—a move that corrupts building codes that were created to ensure safety and structural integrity.

The story began in *British Columbia*, where from 1998 to 2009, the pine beetle killed approximately half of the province’s commercial pine. To help unload the dead timber, wood interests succeeded in passing a provincial Wood First Act that requires wood to be considered as the primary building material for all provincially funded building projects. The Act, which became law in October 2009, aims to create what the province calls “a culture of wood.” At about the same time (April 2009), the provincial building code was changed to permit wood-framing in buildings up to six stories.

The potential effects of this effort on steel framing were exemplified in a September 2010 National Forests Week news release celebrating the province’s Wood First Act—as well as changes to the B.C. Building Code. In that release, the Ministry of Forests and Range touted an example of the effort’s success: A six-story, commercial use project originally planned to be built on steel framing was redesigned for wood framing following changes in the building code.

But even as that announcement was made, the steel industry, along with partners from construction materials organizations, already were mounting a successful counteroffensive to head off Wood First efforts in other areas of Canada.

In Ontario, where an effort is underway at the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to amend the provincial building code to increase the current four-story limit on wood-framed construction to six stories for business, mercantile and residential use, *the Canadian Steel Construction Council*, the Canadian Sheet Steel Building Institute (CSSBI), and other Canadian and US steel interests have been active opponents of the effort, filing comments against proposed code changes. In addition, a task group composed of organizations representing steel, cement, masonry and other materials industries is actively tracking developments there.

The steel industry joined a special coalition specifically dedicated to addressing another emerging threat in *Quebec*, where Provincial Bill 490 would require every new building built in the province, other than residential, to contain at least 5 percent wood material certified and processed in Quebec. For new state buildings, the minimum would be 25 percent. If passed, the changes would kick in January 2012.

National Wood Initiative Goes Down To Defeat

The steel industry, along with partners from other building materials organizations, also worked together in Canada to successfully defeat a national Wood First initiative, Bill C-429, which sought to amend Canada's Department of Public Works and Government Services Act to favor the use of wood in federally funded public works projects.

The bill was defeated in the House of Commons in December 2010—thanks in large measure to the efforts of the Coalition for Fair Construction Practices, which includes representatives of the steel, masonry and other construction materials industries.

Expect Effort To Spread To U.S.

Wood First efforts have begun to emerge on the US side of the border too, and we are actively tracking and fighting those as well.

For example, we are monitoring legislation under consideration in the *Oregon* legislature that would require the state Department of Administrative Services to adopt rules regarding the preferential use of wood in buildings constructed by public bodies financed through state funding. This effort has been stalled for the current legislative session but may come back up again in the future.

SFA also is activating members nationally, asking them to contact members of Congress to push back against a new initiative launched in March by the *U.S. Department of Agriculture*. That mandate, under the guise of sustainability, requires the Forest Service to preferentially select wood in new building construction. SFA members are encouraged to let their congressional representatives and senators know that the policy issued by Secretary Vilsack of the Department of Agriculture to give wood preferential status is ill-advised. It ignores the negative impact on the jobs created by other industries that are critical to the current economic recovery. Further, safety of building occupants should not be decided by proclamation but by the professionals who are specifically trained in these areas. Congress needs to take action to override backdoor initiatives to implement practices that discriminate against specific US –based industries in favor of materials that are mostly imported from elsewhere.

Building On Success

With the exception of British Columbia, our industry has successfully leveraged proven and legitimate engineering and design concerns to oppose building code changes that would permit wood-framed structures above four stories. That fact that British Columbia chose to ignore legitimate concerns points to the need for a response that includes persistent monitoring of legislative activities designed to by-pass the technical processes that have served the building industry well in the past.

As a part of our overall effort, for example, SFA and our allies have been active in informing policymakers and builders about structural concerns and shrinkage in taller wood-framed structures. The steel industry has been joined by other industries and fire officials who have voiced concerns about the fire dangers presented by tall wood-framed buildings, especially during construction—facts born out by an extensive fire study completed in London in 2010.

The case against wood-framed construction above four stories was reinforced late this spring in Richmond, B.C., when a six-story, all-wood condo project—meant to be the first example of such all-wood structures built under the new B.C. Building Code—burnt to ground while still under construction. The fire served to substantiate the findings of the London fire study.

But we have our work cut out for us. The wood industry is well-funded. And it is well-subsidized by the U.S. and Canadian governments. There will be many more attempts at municipal, state, provincial and national levels to launch legislative end runs around common-sense building codes and regulations.

If we are to be successful, the steel industry will need to be more actively engaged in monitoring state and provincial activities. Without the resources to monitor hundreds of jurisdictions, we will need our members to work with us to identify actions as early as possible to stop them before they gain any serious momentum. We ask that you forward information on local or state activities when they develop so we can help maintain a level playing field that respects proven and safe construction practices.

- *Editor, Framework Online*