

The Oregonian

## LEED certification vs. Oregon wood industry



Oregon governments often seek LEED certification for new buildings to demonstrate their commitment to the environment. However, the program turns a cold shoulder to Oregon's forest products industry.

By The Oregonian Editorial Board  
August 24, 2013

LEED certification has become a must-have for many government agencies that want new buildings to say something about their values. The paperwork and auditing alone can boost the cost of even a modest project by tens of thousands of dollars, but public officials often spend the money gladly in exchange for a label that says, in effect, "we care about environmental and employee well-being." It's branding, government style.

Oregon's public sector would be far less enamored of the LEED label, however, if more taxpayers were aware that the certification process discriminates against the state's extensive forest products industry. They might even avoid it entirely for the message its use sends unintentionally: "We care more about environmental branding than Oregon's economy."

LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) is a program of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). It maintains rating systems for various types of projects, which collect points toward certification by incorporating elements related to green design, product origin and so forth. Depending upon how many points a project accumulates, it's eligible for one of several certification levels, from "certified" (ho hum) to LEED Platinum (hooray!).

The problem for Oregon, and the source of resentment within the timber world, is LEED credit awarded for certified wood. The purpose of this credit is to encourage the environmentally responsible management of forests, and using certified wood can generate one point toward certification for new schools, to use one example. Problem is, only wood blessed by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) qualifies, yet several credible and widely used wood-certification programs exist. These include the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and, for many smaller forests, the American Tree Farm System (ATFS).

To avoid acronym overload, consider only FSC- and SFI-certified lands. Of the latter, Oregon has more than 3 million acres. Of the former – the LEED-preferred certification– the state has fewer than 138,000. New Hampshire has more.

Why, you ask, don't all those Oregon forest owners just call up FSC and get themselves LEED legal? The answer -- surprise! -- is complicated, and it has a lot to do with the nature of west-side Oregon forests and with modest differences between the programs themselves.

"Substantively, there isn't a huge difference" between the two programs' requirements here, says Kevin Boston, a professor at Oregon State University's college of forestry. But small differences can matter, and one, he points out, involves maximum clear-cut size. SFI, echoing state rules, targets 120 acres. That's roughly twice the area of FSC's regional maximum. While clear-cuts may not be popular, they're appropriate in forests dominated by Douglas fir, a species that needs full sunlight to regenerate.

That's one reason Roseburg Forest Products has not sought FSC certification for the 460,000 acres of forest it manages in Oregon, relying instead upon strict standards contained in state law. The company has obtained FSC certification, on the other hand, for 175,000 acres of forestland it manages in California. The terrain in Oregon lends itself to larger harvest units, says Eric Geyer, the company's manager of external affairs and corporate development. And so do the trees themselves. The company's California land is heavy on pine, and its Oregon land on Douglas fir.

Despite its use of FSC certification, says Geyer, Roseburg Forest Products opposes its special LEED status. Instead, he argues, LEED should recognize multiple credible certification standards.

Others in the forest products industry share this view, including Weyerhaeuser, which uses SFI for all of its land in North America. Cassie Phillips, Weyerhaeuser's vice president of sustainable forestry, calls the USGBC's exclusive use of FSC "confounding." As opposed to SFI, which is used only in North America, FSC is a global certification system whose requirements vary from country to country. For that reason, Phillips points out, a LEED project could earn credit for FSC-certified wood grown and processed under less stringent standards than wood grown and processed in Oregon under SFI certification. This essentially locks Oregon arbitrarily out of important markets and is the basis of dissatisfaction expressed formally by many in the forest products industry, from the Oregon Small Woodlands Association to Weyerhaeuser. The controversy has even found its way into an executive order signed by Gov. John Kitzhaber.

What all of this means for cities, schools and other public entities in Oregon is that saying "yes" to LEED certification is akin to saying "no" to Oregon's forest products industry and the jobs and revenue it provides. For that reason, they ought to forget about LEED until the USGBC decides to stop playing favorites. If they're worried about branding, they should point out that generic construction is both cheaper and a lot more Oregon-friendly.