

# LUMBER & WOOD: Still Growing Strong

BY JUDITH SHINSATO

While the lumber and wood market is still feeling the pinch of the past few years, this still cannot diminish the material's many inherent advantages, such as its natural beauty and warmth as well as its multifaceted uses.

## Framing the Facts

First, here's a snapshot of the national and local forest, so to speak. Although many have glimpsed the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, for the lumber and wood market, the picture is similar to that of 2010.

"No significant change is being forecast for sawn lumber demand in 2011 over 2010 due to housing starts not showing any signs of increase," says Jeff Browning of Oregon-based lumber shipper Sause Bros. and current president of the Hawaii Lumber Products Industry (HLPA). "This will probably result in Western mills being forced to consider curtailments in order to reduce production to keep supply more in balance with demand and keep prices stable. One factor that could affect this, however, is that many large distribution yards are running very lean on inventory and if any step in with a large position, prices could climb due to decreased production."

Adding a local point of view, Mike Fujimoto, president and CEO of HPM Building Supply, explains, "Since single-family homes use more wood than multifamily homes, a key indicator of future wood product demand is single-family permits. Unfortunately, there is a 4.8 percent

decline from December. Additionally, most national economic advisors are revising their housing forecasts down to an average of 688,000 starts for 2011 from 715,000. Forecasts are being revised downwards because of high levels of unsold inventory, mortgage delinquencies, foreclosures, declining house prices, high unemployment and low consumer confidence. That said, we are seeing slight signs of improvement here in Hawaii and some suppliers in the Northwest are seeing slight improvement in their business activity."

## Verdant and Versatile

Despite the less than lush predictions, wood and lumber still have a number of advantages to offer the construction industry, not the least of which would be its competitive pricing.

Hap Person, president of Honolulu Wood Treating LLC, conducted a nonscientific survey of local lumber prices, visiting three different major building suppliers, the result of which showed various lumber products to be priced, on average, about half that of an alternative framing material.

"The results are specific to that day," explains Person, "but it's very apparent. I think something that's been overlooked is ... how wood has become very competitive." In



addition, the demand for more product can be met, however, he adds, as production has been shut down, lumber mills will be reluctant to open up again until they can get higher prices. "We're still at 20-25 year lows for lumber. We're still in the high \$2, historically about \$3.25 has been the norm for lumber. So it's still very competitive at this point. Supply is not at risk, certainly."

"At Graham Builders, we believe wood is definitely still the material

of choice," says Evan Fujimoto, president of the custom home builder. "This is really driven by cost as wood remains the least expensive material and method for framing a home. Because home projects are price sensitive,

Graham Builders' clients are more often choosing to go with wood."

It is also the choice for residential master developer Gentry Homes. Explaining the reasons behind this, Bob Kayser, vice president, director of construction for Gentry Builders, LLC, says, "We believe (wood) has superior strength. It's really the only sustainable and reusable material. We like it because of the physical properties it has for comfort, such as less heat and noise transmission. When



Evan Fujimoto



Graham Builders says many of its customers choose wood framing for its competitive pricing.

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All Gentry homes have the same structural wood-framed backbone. The only thing that differentiates price is square footage and finishes, according to Bob Kayser, vice president, director of construction.

I say 'sustainable and reusable,' what I mean is that most of the wood comes from managed forests and so, when you cut down a tree, you plant at least one, oftentimes three, in the place of that one. And young forests sequester more carbon than old forests, so you're actually helping lower the carbon footprint by building in wood. By reusable, I mean you can take a wood home apart and reuse the wood."

"Wood products make up almost half of industrial raw materials produced in the United States," adds HPM's Mike Fujimoto. "Wood is the popular choice for single-family and multifamily construction. Wood-based products are strong, less expensive and easy-to-work with. When treated with borate-based wood preservatives, they are highly resistant to termite damage. ... Customers prefer the warmth of wood for flooring, doors, cabinets and millwork products. Wood is a green product too. (It) is the only naturally renewable resource."

## With (Not Against) the Grain

Adding to wood and lumber's versatility is the continuing developments and growing popularity of engineered wood products such as I-joists, glulam (glue laminated) beams and oriented strand board (OSB), all of which are made by binding the strands, particles, fibers or veneers of wood together with adhesives to form composite materials.

"The demand for engineered wood products will continue because they represent more efficient use of wood fiber," says Dave Rinell of Rinell Wood systems. "Floor and roof systems with engineered wood, if properly designed, are cost effective for many types of construction."

Adds Person, "It's a better use of wood fiber. It has more strength than a standard dimensional board of lumber and is straighter because we've taken the natural desire for the product to curl or wane out by remanufacturing it. And we're able to utilize what used to be considered nonusable fiber, so smaller tree fiber that used to be just left in the forest now is recouped for these processes."

"Engineered wood products are definitely playing a bigger role in how single and multifamily homes are built today," says Mike Fujimoto. "Engineered wood products save time, are easy to install, are light weight, reduce callback, are stronger than conventional lumber and are

cost efficient. We're seeing some customers use our Ikaika wood I-joist products where conventional wood trusses are normally installed. Contractors like that they're light, easy to install and can support higher roof loads. Engineered Ikaika LVL studs can be used to build tall walls that are straight. While the economic downturn has been tough, additional products are becoming more available, giving builders more choices."

According to Evan Fujimoto, Graham Builders uses primarily TJI wood truss-joists for floor framing, and Parallam beams for girders and long span headers. "The dimensional stability, reduced deflection and longer spans that can be achieved make these products attractive," he says. "TJIs are also marketed as 'quiet floors' due to their wider top and bottom flanges, which provide better seating for the joists themselves and the sub-flooring that's nailed to the top, which reduces the occurrence of floor squeaks.

"We have noticed many more engineered wood products, the most common being finger-jointed door jambs, casings and baseboards. Even crown moldings and other trims are being made by using shorter stock that is finger-jointed and preprimed," Fujimoto continues. "Another thing affecting the popularity of engineered wood products is the selection. Before,



Gentry's Bob Kayser conducts inspections at the Kanehili neighborhood in West Oahu.

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all we saw were the most common woods: oak, maple and cherry. Now we've seen engineered wood floors with a huge selection of woods – African mahogany, Brazilian cherry, eucalyptus, acacia, walnut, jatoba, sapele, tigerwood, etc.”

## Tackling Termites

“For Hawaii, borate continues to be a popular, low-cost solution for treating lumber and plywood products,” says Mike Fujimoto of HPM. “More manufacturers are using zinc borate to produce their engineered products. LP is the leader in using zinc borate for its OSB structural panel and OSB siding production. Fiberon Composites manufactures its decking with zinc borate.”

“There haven't been any big changes in wood treating for the last almost 20 years now,” adds Person. “The borate products that have come into the Hawaii market for our end use have performed to a very high standard. We have less than one half of 1 percent of claims against 20-year warranties on house framing in Hawaii from the Hi-Bor label. The treatment is a rather economical process. It doesn't rely on heavy metals that fluctuate in price a little more, so it's been a very stable and well-proven product. Framing with wood now is virtually termite-free if treated properly.”

“We've had very little problem with the borate treatment,” says Gentry's Kayser. “We haven't had a claim on it that I know of since we've been using the product.”



Use of engineered wood such as TimberStrand LSL truss joists shown here are a popular choice for floor and roof systems.

## More Life in the Forest

According to HLP's Browning, the now being enforced 2006 building code makes wood framing more cost effective in comparison to other building materials because it requires improved thermal resistance values for walls and roofs from radiant heat gain, and wood framing is proven to be less conductive of heat.

“Until recently, the building code (also) required R30 insulation in ceilings, whether flat, with attic space above, or vaulted,” adds Graham Builders' Fujimoto. “This was recently amended to allow R19 insulation in vaulted ceilings to accommodate shallower rafter depths. R30 insulation is about 9.5 inches thick, which requires 2x12 rafters, even for short spans. The change allows 2x8 rafters to be used if they meet structural requirements for shorter spans. This allows us to reduce the board footage of lumber to frame vaulted ceilings, which reduces costs, especially on large roofs.”

Fujimoto continues: “One development we're implementing at Graham Builders is a rain screen siding system. Basically, various wood sidings or cementitious panel sidings ... are affixed to battens, creating an airspace between the siding and the shear wall paneling surface.

“There are several benefits to using this type of system. First, the gap between the siding and the wall prevents moisture and mold accumulation within wall cavities or between wall layers. Constant airflow behind the siding and wall helps to dry out moisture that would ordinarily become trapped and begin deteriorating the wall's components,” says Fujimoto. “Second, the air gap minimizes heat transfer from the siding to wall and into the home's interior. Finally, rain screen systems provide our designers with a fresh approach to enliven the exterior elevations of our homes.”

HPM's Mike Fujimoto discusses another trend in the lumber market: “The decline in the domestic housing market is forcing sawmills to reinvent themselves. Some mills are investing and pursuing business in Asia. Other mills are making more specialty products. Mills have adjusted to the slow market by carrying smaller inventories and cutting back production shifts.”

Finally, all of those involved with wood and lumber never fail to mention that wood is the only renewable building material, making it one of the most “green.” Kayser attributes Gentry's many awards for sustainable building at least in part to wood framing: “We think that wood is one of the reasons we've been able to do that. Wood is good. Wood has withstood the test of time.” **BI**

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