

States Fight Green-Building Leader Over Local Wood

by **Associated Press**

Posted 6/10/2013 07:34 am

Updated 1 hour ago

SAVANNAH, Ga. - A building supplier phoned Pollard Lumber Co. about providing wood for a large government construction project in Georgia, but the deal broke down over a single question about how the family-owned sawmill has committed itself to environmentally friendly practices.

The mill in rural Appling holds certification by a national forestry group to verify it uses timber harvested in a sustainable manner. That wasn't good enough to get the government job two years ago. The contractor wanted wood that would earn points toward recognition by Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, the No. 1 rating system for green building. And LEED holds timber producers to a high standard met by few in the Southeast.

"For the people that I was dealing with, the nearest mill that was certified at that point was in Arkansas or Mississippi," said Bert Pollard, chief forester at the Georgia lumber company that employs about 150 workers. "We could have produced the lumber for them right then."

LEED has been at the forefront of an explosion in energy-efficient, environmentally conscious construction over the past decade. Administered by the nonprofit U.S. Green Building Council, the LEED program puts its stamp on an estimated 1.5 million square feet of new construction worldwide each day. But the program is facing an outcry from a growing number of governors and legislatures who say LEED uses unfair standards that effectively keep their states' timber growers out of the booming green-building market.

In Georgia, Gov. Nathan Deal last year used an executive order to ban state government construction projects from seeking LEED certification. Alabama, Maine and Mississippi also enacted bans, while a similar measure has passed the North Carolina House and awaits a Senate vote. South Carolina stopped short of prohibiting LEED certification, instead banning state projects from earning points for sustainable wood. Florida passed a bill, awaiting the governor's signature, requiring use of local wood when possible.

Deal used a speech to the Southern Group of State Foresters meeting in Savannah last week to urge foresters from government agencies across the Southeast to push the issue with their own governors back home.

"Prior to my executive order, some 99 percent of Georgia's forests were unfairly excluded from consideration as being an appropriate green material for building," Deal told the group.

The state backlash comes as LEED stakeholders are voting this month on a revised version of its green-building standards, which are voluntary but have become increasingly desirable for private companies and government agencies looking to burnish their environmental credentials.

The Green Building Council says the ruckus has been drummed up by industry groups trying to pressure it into giving LEED sustainability credits for wood that hasn't earned them. The push is being led by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, or SFI, which certifies more than 60 million acres of U.S. timberland including forests owned by corporate giants such as Weyerhaeuser and Rayonier. The group and its standards were created by the timber industry, though SFI says it's been independently governed for the past decade.

SFI and an affiliated program, the American Tree Farm System favored by many small landowners, aren't recognized for certifying sustainable wood that's eligible for LEED credit. The green-building program counts only wood labeled as sustainably grown and harvested by one group - the Forest Stewardship Council, or FSC, which operates in 80 countries. It certifies some 35 million U.S. acres but has been unpopular in several of the states where officials are speaking out against FSC's exclusivity with LEED. Georgia, Florida and the Carolinas, for example, each have less than 100,000 acres of FSC certified land.

The groups that say they're being snubbed by LEED insist all three standards accomplish the same big-picture goals for ensuring sustainable timber growth - they require replanting after trees are removed by logging, they impose buffers next to rivers and streams to reduce pollution and they contain protections for habitat used by endangered animals.

"That's not true. There are differences," said Lane Burt, policy director for the U.S. Green Building Council. "Your candy can have a third less sugar, but it's still not a health food."

For example, the standard LEED uses to credit builders for using sustainable wood bans the use of certain pesticides that are allowed under the other two systems and by U.S. law. The standard LEED uses also discourages replanting of forests plantation-style, where trees of the same species and often the same age are planted in neat rows like crops. That method is especially popular with Southern pine growers.

Burt also notes builders don't have to use wood certified by anybody to attain LEED's stamp of approval. Much like Boy Scouts can rise through the ranks earning different types of merit badges, builders earn LEED certification by choosing from 110 different credits. They can include use of recycled materials,

reducing water consumption and features that conserve electricity. Wood gets two possible credits - one for using timber that certified for sustainable methods and another for using locally grown wood.

Still, timber growers such as Dr. Salem Saloom, a retired surgeon from Brewton, Ala., fear they're being set up for substantial losses if LEED's popularity continues to grow and their wood won't qualify for its sustainability credits. A market analysis by McGraw-Hill concluded green construction in the U.S. jumped from nonresidential work valued at \$3 billion in 2005 to more than \$43 billion in 2010. And it predicted U.S. green building could surpass \$120 billion by 2015. While others also certify green construction, LEED is by far the leader. McGraw Hill says LEED certification is sought by 71 percent of all construction projects of \$50 million or more.

Saloom has 1,762 acres, most of it planted pine, in south Alabama that's certified by the American Tree Farm System. He acknowledged the demand for wood that satisfies LEED sustainability requirements hasn't hurt him yet. But he fears it could.

"Over a period of time, if you're going to do any building and want to get points for environmentally sound construction, it's going to affect the landowners because we're not gonna be able to sell our wood," Saloom said. "There is a (LEED) point for buying local, but we think we should be on equal terms and every system should be treated equally."

Burt of the Green Building Council said LEED's standards for sustainable wood aren't likely to change in the revisions now up for a vote. He said the certification methods being pushed by angry states and timber growers have failed to win over enough of the council's member stakeholders, particularly those representing environmental groups.

"At the end of the day the line's got to be drawn somewhere," Burt said. "Every product manufacturer wants more points for their stuff."

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