

Finding quality lumber for trusses

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Many truss manufacturers now employ virtually a full time lumber sorter. Lately these guys have been culling up to 40% of the lumber deliveries, according to the Ontario Wood Truss Fabricators Association spokesman, Mike Phillips.

According to Toronto-based Phillips that cull should be reduced to 5% or 10% of the total lumber delivery for the quality of wood required for roof and floor truss fabrication. The cost of excessive lumber cull is too high for the Ontario Truss industry, Phillips says.

The lumber sorter, at the truss manufacturing location, is looking for bark residue, wane and warp problems, insect damage, splits and knots. Today's computer generated truss designs require quality wood.

The truss industry is hoping that more Ontario lumber manufacturers can deliver more wood to the truss plants that meets the #2 and above, or MSR grade for favourable fabrication of the roof and floor trusses. The truss industry takes a minority of its lumber supply from Ontario now.

From the sawmill owners perspective, they are saying that lumber grading is going out the window though. Several owners told *The Working Forest* that trying to sell according to grade is becoming very difficult for their mills.

Sawmill manufacturers report that buyers for the major lumber depots ask for "number 4", "but with no bark, splits, no insect damage, and perfect wane and warp." When the sawmillers respond, "But that is a number 1!", the big chain buyers say, "No I am only paying for number 4.!!!"

The truss group has assessed that 100 million board feet of lumber are turned into trusses in Ontario. There are some lengths that are only available from out of province lumber producers, but at the moment the truss group sees that they should pursue a better fit with the lumber industry. At the association's 2010 annual meeting members pondered whether "the good quality lumber from Ontario is going somewhere else, because the truss industry is not worth the consideration of lumber manufacturers?"

If there is a higher cost to better quality lumber there may be a savings in the long run to the truss fabricator. The labour cost and waste cost will be significantly reduced in the truss plant. Instead of up to 40% waste now, there will only be 5% waste of the raw, delivered lumber. But they are not sure that paying more is the only answer to better and stronger lumber. The real cost of lumber quality might not be in board feet but it might be in market share of the construction market.

The demand for the prettiest wood, chosen stick by stick by the consumer seems to be a new element that has pushed the sawmills to provide premium wood at lowest prices. In supermarket style buying, consumers demand wood, much of it for structural projects, that has turned the basic utility 2x4 into a consumer product.

Sawmills that log their own limits see that less and less prime forest is available, and road access is limited. "We can't cut the prime forest now, with fewer and fewer areas accessible, and fewer trees marked in the limited area. We are forced to cut the junk first, with good forest being left for seed trees." Most likely the prime forest is left for blowdown and woodpeckers.

Canadian softwood still features the best construction elements; strong, light, and nail friendly lumber. Commercial wood buyers are left to find the best of the worst, it seems.

