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Local lumber is building bridges

Wood alliance connects builders, craftsmen, foresters

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The Portland Tribune Dec 7, 2006

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ot a home-building or remodeling project? Want to support local businesses and sustainable forestry in Oregon? Look no further than the Build Local Alliance.

Founded in late 2005, the Build Local Alliance is a network of foresters, architects, builders, furniture makers and others working together to create a local market for

ber from Oregon's sustainable forests.

Founded by Peter Hayes and Stephen Aiguier, the BLA connects foresters directly with the end users of their wood products, building business through familiarity and adding value one handshake at a time.

Traditionally, a forester grows a tree and sells it to a mill. The tree goes to a sort yard, then is turned into lumber, which might go to a distribution yard or a wholesaler. It is bought by a builder and then gets installed in your house.

"As many steps as there are, each one gets paid for what they do," Hayes says. "You end up paying an awful lot for your piece of wood."

Following the rigorous standards of the Forest Stewardship Council, foresters in the Build Local Alliance remove individual trees for logging, rather than clear-cutting, and are committed to growing a diversity of trees rather than a single species.

In Hayes' family-owned, FSC-certified Hyla Woods, stands are multiage and multispecies. Although clear-cut forestry may be more profitable in the short run, Hayes is trying to prove that a forest can be both economically viable and ecologically complex.

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“Our goals are not just the volume of wood,” Hayes says. Sustainable forestry practices increase Hayes’ costs by a third.

“We want to get a better return, and sell to people who care about the characteristics of this wood,” he says.

Hayes knew people wanted FSC-certified wood from local foresters. “But unless you find some way to connect with them,” he says, “we’re selling logs in this sort of anonymous pipeline.”

Group widens the network

Aiguier’s Green Hammer Construction buys FSC-certified lumber to support not only good forestry practices but also social standards.

“Part of that social standard is workers’ rights and safety. A lot of issues go on even in Oregon forests that we don’t know about,” Aiguier says. “Even if wood was local, if it wasn’t certified, and if I didn’t know where it was coming from, I really didn’t want to be supporting it, and neither did our clients.”

“There are lot of people who would like to see this kind of forestry succeed,” Hayes says. He is encouraged by working with others who are committed to conservation to create markets that value more sustainable practices.

Some of these direct forester-to-builder connections already were happening on a smaller scale, but the BLA offers a wider network to support local businesses interested in sustainability.

The BLA called its first meeting in December 2005. “We invited 18 people,” Hayes says, “and I think 28 showed up.”

The BLA currently is made up of about 30 professionals who meet every four to six weeks.

Adam Olsen of Parr Lumber is on the BLA Steering Committee. Olsen, who works for Parr in contractor sales, sees builders who are interested not only in FSC-certified lumber, but in “as much green products as they can get their hands on.”

“As this niche grows and expands, more and more lumber will be coming from local sources, just by virtue of what it is and what our clients and customers want,” he says.

The BLA bases its model on the success of farmers markets, farm shares and direct sales of local produce to restaurants.

“The chefs didn’t use to serve brussels sprouts, but brussels sprouts grow here,” Hayes says. “You need to change the chefs’ tastes and the customers’ tastes. It’s the same with wood.”

Buying local also cuts down on the energy expended in shipping products across state lines and even around the world.

“We can buy everything ideally through local forests,” Aiguier says. “We can walk through the forests and feel good about where everything’s coming from.”

Money stays closer to home

Not all FSC-certified wood ends up in construction. Reform Sustainable Furnishings in Southeast Portland buys wood grown and milled by Hayes’ Hyla Woods to create custom furniture.

Most of Reform’s business comes from customers looking to support sustainable forestry. Jeff Rowe, one of Reform’s owners, says, “Just being able to tell the story of where this material came from gives a lot more meaning to our products and to our business, in being associated with the Build Local

Alliance.”

“It’s the easiest sale you could ever make,” Aiguier says. “Just showing that this is our commitment. It’s great forestry. It’s also supporting the local economy, and everybody relates to that.”

Aiguier estimates that for every dollar spent on standard lumber, only 10 cents remains in Oregon. But when buying local, sustainable lumber, “we’re able to keep it all within a 100-mile radius.”

Hayes acknowledges that cost is a concern: “There’s a perception that if you’re going to go with this kind of wood, it’s going to cost you more.” But he says that by having foresters sell directly to end users, the end cost is about the same — and local, sustainable foresters realize a better profit.

Hayes hopes that as people become more educated about sustainable forestry, they will “vote with their pocketbooks,” choosing products that are in line with personal values.

One of Aiguier’s goals is for the BLA to serve as a model for other communities.

“If you can set up that system and repeat it, I think that’s ultimately where forestry is going to have to go,” he says.

Find out more

To learn more about the Build Local Alliance, visit their Web site, www.buildlocal.org, or contact Rebecca Novis, 503-317-8667, or [rebecca@build](mailto:rebecca@buildlocal.org)

local.org.

- Hyla Woods

www.hylawoods.com

2330 N.W. Belgrave Ave., 503-241-6479

- Green Hammer Construction

greenhammerconstruction.com

1323 S.E. Sixth Ave., 503-804-1746

- Reform Sustainable Furnishings

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