

USDA Leads the Way on Green Buildings, Use of Wood Products

WASHINGTON, March 30, 2011 -- Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced today USDA's strategy to promote the use of wood as a green building material. At an event this evening to launch the International Year of the Forest, Secretary Vilsack will lay out a three-part plan addressing the Forest Service's and USDA's current green building practices.

"Wood has a vital role to play in meeting the growing demand for green building materials. Forest Service studies show that wood compares favorably to competing materials," said Vilsack. "In keeping with the Obama Administration's America's Great Outdoors conservation agenda, USDA has made a strong commitment to conserving and restoring our forests to protect watersheds, recreation, and rural jobs."

The strategy includes the following parts:

1. The U.S. Forest Service will preferentially select wood in new building construction while maintaining its commitment to certified green building standards. USDA will also make a commitment to using wood and other agricultural products as it fulfills President Obama's executive order on Federal Leadership in Environmental, Energy, and Economic Performance.
2. The Secretary has asked the U.S. Forest Service to examine ways to increase its already strong commitment to green building by reporting to him on ways to enhance the research and development being done around green building materials.
3. The U.S. Forest Service will actively look for opportunities to demonstrate the innovative use of wood as a green building material for all new structures of 10,000 square feet or more using recognized green building standards such as LEED, Green Globes or the National Green Building Standard.

In carrying out this initiative, Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell issued a directive to all units this week calling for increased use of locally milled timber in all new agency buildings and facilities. Secretary Vilsack also directed the heads of all other USDA agencies to incorporate the Forest Service policy of using domestic sustainable wood products as the preferred green building material for all USDA facilities and buildings.

"Our country has the resources, the work force and the innovative spirit to reintroduce wood products into all aspects of the next generation of buildings," Tidwell said. "As we move forward with restoring America's forests, we are getting smarter and more efficient in how we use wood products as both an energy and green building source, which will help maintain rural jobs."

A recent Forest Service lifecycle analysis found that harvesting, transporting, manufacturing and using wood in Lumber and panel products in building yields fewer air emissions – including greenhouse gases – than resource extraction, manufacturing and using other commonly-used building materials. In fact, wood –based wall systems can require significantly less total energy for manufacturing than thermally comparable houses using other common material systems.

Research arms of the U.S. Forest Service are also experimenting with new and innovative ways to use smaller diameter timber and leftover branches and limbs for wood products, which includes nanotechnology advancements and the use of laminate technologies.

Finally, the Forest Service is also encouraging the use of current renewable energy advances, such as wood-to-energy power systems, low-impact environmental site designs, green purchasing and operation and maintenance practices. USDA is highlighting its green building policy in the Strategic Sustainability Performance Plan, the Department's blueprint for implementing President Obama's sustainability executive order (E.O. 13514). USDA will complete an update to that plan this June.

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