

Building Local Connections

A new alliance of Portland-area builders seeks to expand on the local food movement

By Dan Sadowsky
AUGUST 10, 2006

RICKREALL, OREGON – At Zena Timber, it's common to see small piles of felled trees awaiting transport to the lumber mill. But here, alongside a rutted dirt road and amid two thousand acres of firs, cedars, oaks and other native trees, one ordinary looking stack of Douglas fir logs is about to embark an unusual journey.

They won't be shipped to an industrial mill, where they would be graded, sorted, and chopped up for the commodity markets. Instead, explains Sara Deumling, the steward of these thickly forested lands, they will be trucked to Kaster's Kustom Cutting, a four-person operation in nearby Mulino. There, the wood will be made into wall studs, trim pieces, large beams and an assortment of other custom millwork – enough to supply the needs of two new homes in Southwest Portland's Collins View neighborhood.



"From Family Forest to Family Home" - Pictured are (left to right): Kent Goodyear, Sarah Deumling, Henry - dog, David Glass – D & B Glass Inc., Rick Wells – Tree Taxi Express, Rebecca Novis – Green Hammer Construction, Katharine Lawrence – home owner

This woods-to-walls deal is the first test of an innovative purchasing model endorsed by the Build Local Alliance, a budding consortium of Portland-area builders, millers, forestland owners and lumberyards. Seeking to adapt the model of the Farmer-Chef Connection – a six-year-old effort by Ecotrust and the Portland Chapter of the Chefs Collaborative to connect regional growers with buyers of high quality foods – the Build Local Alliance wants local builders to be able to buy products from Oregon landowners whose practices are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

"We're up against a million-dollar industry that is failing us ecologically and economically," says Stephen Aiguier, president of environmental builder Green Hammer and one of the founders of the Build Local Alliance. He and other members are concerned that industrial-scale commercial timber harvesting has transformed many of Oregon's forests into monospecies tree farms and led to practices that are both ecologically and economically unsustainable.

Aiguier says he and other alliance members also want to make it easier for what's grown in the region's FSC-certified forests to make it into the hands of local builders. And he hopes the pair of three-bedroom, two-bath homes he is building for Katharine Lawrence and Charlie Weiss will prove that it can work. "I get calls from people all around Oregon asking for builders, and at the same time, I'm hearing that owners of sustainably managed forest are not reaching these markets. Local needs to be a part of green building."

Lawrence and Weiss say their commitment to buying local, FSC-certified wood required some flexibility. But they appreciate the payoff – being able to reward good land stewards and to showcase the better-quality wood that grows in FSC forests. Aiguier expects "extraordinary results" from design features such as large, exposed beams and tongue-and-

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groove car decking. “The wood makes a great story,” says Lawrence. “All the more reason to make it more visible.”

Roughly 18,000 acres of forestland between Roseburg and Portland is managed under FSC certification, according to Kent Goodyear, who directs Ecotrust’s initiative to expand the supply of and grow demand for FSC products. But most of that wood ends up in conventional lumberyards because there aren’t enough nearby mills that are certified by FSC to process those logs.

At the same time, Kevin Kaster, owner of Kaster’s Kustom Cutting, miller of the wood for the Collins View homes and one of the few Portland-area millers who is FSC certified, says he has trouble finding markets for the lumber he cuts from local wood.

“Those are the issues we need to address,” explains Goodyear. “There’s no distribution system, and so there’s no way to connect those logs to the local market. That’s the idea behind the Build Local Alliance.”

The alliance is helping builders like Aiguier to remedy today’s market inefficiencies by forging stronger connections among like-minded partners all along the supply chain – starting with the grower of the trees. For the homes in the Collins View neighborhood, those connections start back at Zena Timber, where Sara Deumling likes to explain the virtues of sound forest management by taking visitors to a hilly patch of Oregon white oak, big leaf maple and Douglas fir of various ages and varieties, all cushioned by a soft mat of grasses and ferns underfoot. It’s a spot that illustrates the diversity that is the hallmark of FSC management.

“My interest is in healthy and ecologically diverse forests that are economically viable.” But the two can’t go together, she insists, without a market that recognizes the true value of her forest-management practices and the true costs of industrial forestry. She says the Build Local Alliance can help grow that market. “My goal is to show that family forest owners can do it right,” she says, “and still make a living.”