

68TH UNECE TIMBER COMMITTEE MEETING

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Palais des Nations – the United Nations headquarters in Europe

The 68th meeting of the UNECE Timber Committee was held at the UN Palais des Nations facility in Geneva, Switzerland October 11-12, 2010, under the general theme “Innovative Wood Products are the Future.” Held for the first time as a joint meeting with a professional organization, the 2010 edition was a cooperative venture with the Society of Wood Science and Technology. The meeting was also cosponsored by IUFRO-Division 5. Some 280 on-site attendees, including representatives of some 43 countries from five continents, and over 100 registrants who participated online in a webinar format contributed to the considerable success of the event.

The UNECE Timber Committee was established in the mid-1940s and operates under the umbrella of the UNECE/FAO Forestry & Timber Section. The section is unique in that it is a joint UNECE/FAO secretariat that oversees the UNECE Timber Committee and FAO European Forestry Commission and which operates to a mandate agreed by the 56 countries that together comprise the UNCED region. The work of the Timber Committee revolves around data gathering and analysis, market assessment, monitoring of policy developments affecting the sector, information exchange, and development of sector outlook studies. The Committee, through its meetings, also provides a forum for policy discussion about major issues that affect the forest sector.

While the formal Timber Committee meetings were limited to October 11-12, SWST-organized technical sessions were interwoven with market discussions and then continued through the remainder of the week. Market discussions and technical discussions examined market trends in a number of product categories, considered the impact of codes and standards on material use and construction practices, and delved into the science and commercial potential of topics ranging from innovation in building products and structural design to nanotechnology applications in forest products. A well-attended Thursday evening banquet in downtown Geneva, and site visits to CERN - The European Organization for Nuclear Research, and the Laboratory for Timber Construction of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne on Friday, concluded the meeting.

The gathering featured 54 speakers and the presentation of 98 posters, as well as an exhibition of innovative wood products from around the world. The exhibition will remain at the Palais des Nations through much of 2011 as part of the Year of the Forest celebration.

In addition to IUFRO Division 5, key sponsors of the event included Maney Publishing, Centre de Recherche sur le Bois and Université Laval, FP Innovations, Surface Measurement Systems, CEI-Bois, and Schweighofer Prize.

Technical sessions included:

- Markets for use of solid and engineered products in green construction
- Innovative wood and wood-based materials and their use in sustainable construction
- Structural design for sustainable construction and disaster mitigation
- The role of nanotechnology in green materials and sustainable construction
- Current challenges in wood science education

The meeting also featured a joint Timber Committee/SWST Policy Forum focused on building codes and standards and their influence on material use and construction practices. This session served as a continuation of work done previously in two green-building workshops organized by the Team of Specialists on Forest Products Marketing in 2008 and 2009, and was designed to give a methodological approach to the influence of building codes and standards on building material use and construction practices. Among the conclusions arising from this policy forum, as summarized by participants and UNECE technical staff, were the following:

1. As a major component of human-induced environment impact, construction can make a huge contribution through “sustainable building” (sometimes referred to as “green building”). While prospects for construction in much of the UNECE region are set to remain bleak, sustainable building has huge potential.
2. Wood has not yet taken the role it should in sustainable building, often losing ground to less sustainable materials. Essential knowledge has to be developed for the proper design of buildings with wood, for energy efficiency and durability, among others.
3. It must be acknowledged that although wood has a positive contribution to sustainable building, its use alone does not guarantee the result of sustainable buildings.
4. Up to now sustainable building standards and assessment systems have not been easily comparable and at times partial for lack of scientific basis. In spite of this, specifiers often do consider wood positively, based on knowledge they have of wood energy efficiency and substitution benefits. The concerns they do have in general about wood are linked to the sustainability of forest management. To help provide a neutral framework for the further development of building standards, codes and assessment systems, a full scientifically based approach is needed.
5. Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) and Environmental Products Declarations (EPDs) are core tools for

scientifically assessing building designs and materials selection that employ common metrics in a harmonised framework. LCA is complex and costly but currently available LCA-based tools can be used to support a sound understanding of sustainable building and the role of wood products in them.

6. It is important to recognize the current limits of LCA, including scant attention to land use and socio-economical issues. Although more comprehensive tools are under development, a major issue is how to make available operationally the knowledge they can unlock.
7. As to accounting of the role of forests and wood in mitigating climate change, it was observed that:
 - All sound sustainable forest management certification programs should be recognized in green building certification systems.
 - There remains a need for a universally accepted methodology to account for the increase in forest carbon stocks from sustainable forest management.
 - There is in place an accepted methodology for determining environmental impacts of product substitution, but not for determining carbon sequestration - for which more work is needed. Developing such methodology has important implications for proper carbon accounting and, in turn, for international trade.
8. Wood’s end-of-life phase merits attention. Too much wood ends up in land-fills. Such wood could be recovered and then re-used or recycled or used for energy, with recovery or avoidance of methane emissions. Part of the solution lies in developing markets for recovered energy (heat and power). Research in this area is still required since this issue is far from resolved.

A key recommendation from the Joint Policy Forum was that the Executive Secretary of UNECE should form a Sustainable Building Task Force to be composed of experts from the Timber Committee, the Housing Committee, the Committee for Environmental Policy, and the Energy Committee, with volunteering partners, to jointly address comparative impacts of the use of various materials in buildings and their carbon efficiency. It was further recommended that the Task Force should be used as a tool by the UNECE secretariat to participate in and contribute to the United Nations Environmental Partnership (UNEP) Sustainable Building Climate Initiative.

The full text of all presentations and accompanying slides for the full meeting can be viewed at <http://timber.unece.org/index.php?id=321>.