



By Nature's Design: Forest Stewardship in Action

By Lorraine Alexander

On any typical weekend, American consumers plan home projects and purchase lumber. But very few take the time to consider the harvesting practices of the wood product they're about to purchase or the long-term effect(s) of that selection. Often, that wood has been clear-cut from a forest—meaning the entire forest is cut down, leaving nothing behind except trauma for wildlife and something that resembles an obliterated battlefield. There is a better way, and consumer awareness is the first step.

On September 20, the Redwood Empire Chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC-REC) hosted A Walk in the Woods, a daylong tour on the topic of sustainable forestry, with a goal of bringing awareness to key industry drivers including builders, suppliers, designers and engineers. It was an exceptionally rare opportunity to see a sustainable harvesting site firsthand. The tour took attendees deep into the Ukiah forest, owned and managed by Mendocino Redwood Company and Humboldt Redwood, which manages more than 440,000 forest acres to the highest environmental standards and guidelines of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

Upon arrival, the tour group hiked into one of the few remaining old-growth forests in Mendocino County, Hendy Woods State Park, filled with majestic redwoods well over 1,200 years old. This regal redwood grove, forever scarred from historic lightning fires, continues to stand tall and flourish. Attendees left the grove with a newfound awareness, which was the exact intent of this preliminary stop.

Sustainable harvesting plans

The tour continued deep into the FSC-managed forest, where registered foresters demonstrated how each tree is carefully scrutinized before being hand-selected and marked for harvest. This high standard of forestry strives for "uneven age management" to preserve a variety of first-, second- and third-year growth in the forest, allowing for diversity in both height and canopy of the existing trees. As a rule, old-growth trees are never harvested.

Each year, the Mendocino Redwood Company develops 25 to 40 harvesting plans, approximately 200 pages each, written by registered professional foresters and submitted to the state of California for approval, before any trees can be harvested. Each plan is a prescription of sorts, upholding the highest forestry practices of FSC, including replanting with an anticipated turnaround time of 80 years. Approval for each of these plans can take up to three months.

But before there are any plans made for harvest, these registered foresters maintain a watchful eye and exercise caution with special attention to wildlife habitat preservation. As an example, a mating pair of endangered spotted owls is awarded a circumference of 72 acres of protected forest so they're not disturbed, and a young owl that hasn't mated yet and is sighted in multiple areas is awarded 72 acres for each sighting location.

Combined, the circumference of transitory protection for this single owl can add up to 200 to 300 acres until its exact nesting location can be determined. That means not one single tree is disturbed in that area, and the endangered owls are safe from harm.

Mendocino Redwood Company also initiates other projects to restore habitat. The tour stopped on a bridge, beautifully crafted from recycled railroad flatcars. Below it was a once-void stream that's now regenerated by design, proving that years of planning and hard work pay off. Now the stream supports local wildlife and, in the winter season, it flourishes with spawning Coho salmon.

The decking dilemma

Many consumers, architects and designers have turned away from redwood purchases for decking, believing that man-made composite materials are a better environmental solution. But the reality of the energy-consumptive manufacturing process, along with the long-term effects of the prolonged decomposition of these manufactured products in landfills, is an eye-opener. After understanding the breadth and scope of these high forestry standards, many attendees openly concluded that the best material choice for decking is FSC redwood.

We know the lumber market is consumer-driven, and the biggest challenge is consumer awareness. The average consumer knows little about lumber harvesting and forestry practices. Most never give their choices much consideration and prefer to save a few dollars at the lumberyard, or they're easily taken in by false advertising of products that claim to be sustainable. We need to ask critical questions before we specify or purchase materials: What is the cost to our environment? Are our choices actually putting us at risk?

When will we stop to consider the actual cost of our choices? Now is the time to hit the reset button. Mendocino Redwood is currently writing an 80-Year Habitat Conservation Plan for submission to the state of California. This is the type of progressive thought and leadership in action that needs our support. USGBC-REC continues to focus on sustainable education that enhances our built environment. With a vast region spanning seven counties, community education and outreach is a priority. To learn more about upcoming events and tours in Marin, Sonoma, and Napa Counties, go to www.usgbc-rec.org.

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