

Milling and Marketing of Eastern Hemlock Lumber

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Abstract

Eastern hemlock lumber is manufactured for use in the construction industry. A brief history from the mid-1970s to the present, production challenges, and marketing issues were presented.

Two high capacity stud mills, St. Regis Paper and Diamond Lumber, were opened in Maine during 1974, each cutting eastern hemlock as a portion of their total production. Approximately 40 million board feet of studs were produced annually for the first 5 years. About 1979, St. Regis Paper changed their strategy for the mill and began cutting spruce, pine, and fir exclusively. This left Diamond International's mill at Passadumkeag, Maine now owned by Champion International Corporation, as the only significant producer of eastern hemlock building studs.

Production Challenges:

- Hemlock comes from scattered mixed species stands.
- Hemlock is difficult to de-bark in winter.
- Hemlock is difficult to mill due to ring shake.

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- There are limited outlets for green chips produced in the milling process.
- Grade is poorer and lumber recovery is less than in competing species such as spruce, pine, or fir.
- It is impractical to dry hemlock to the "Kiln Dried" specification; therefore, a "Surfaced Green" grade stamp must be used.
- The heavier weight per ft³ of hemlock is harder on equipment compared to competing softwoods.

Marketing Issues:

- Shipping weight and therefore freight costs are higher than competing species.
- There are few customers for green eastern hemlock studs.
- Eastern hemlock competes directly with green Douglas-fir and western hemlock, but producers of lumber from these species are producing more "Kiln Dried" product because these species are more easily dried and the product more valuable.

Both production and marketing of eastern hemlock lumber are challenging due to a variety of inherent characteristics. The market for green hemlock lumber is a niche or specialty market and needs to be approached with a different strategy from that needed in a larger commodity market such as kiln-dried construction lumber.