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# LEED's Changing Certified Wood Credits

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In order to qualify for [LEED for Homes](#) status, residential homebuilders must earn at least 45 out of a possible 136 points, which typically requires them to invest extra time, extra money and extra effort in the minutiae that set green buildings apart from their conventional counterparts.

But some LEED points are easier to earn than others, according to Matt Root, green building manager for Conservation Services Group, a Boston-based non-profit organization that helps clients achieve LEED, Energy Star Home and Earth Advantage green building certifications. Among the more difficult points to earn, he says, are those awarded by the [U.S. Green Building Council](#) (USGBC) for the use of sustainable lumber.

“Under the current LEED for Homes guidelines, there is a credit that deals with environmentally preferable products,” Root says. “If a builder wants to claim optional credits under that section for his wood selection, the wood must be FSC-certified. [Also] any tropical wood used in a LEED home must be FSC-certified.”

Since its inception in 1998, LEED has only recognized lumber certified by the [Forest Stewardship Council](#) (FSC). Since 2006, however, it's been studying proposed changes to its certified wood credits that would open the LEED system to competing wood certification systems. While opponents worry that the changes would weaken standards for sustainable lumber, supporters argue that they would make sustainable lumber—and LEED accreditation in general—more affordable and more accessible to a wider cross-section of builders, to the benefit of both the industry and the environment.

## Inside LEED's wood credits

According to the USGBC, homebuilders can currently earn up to 6.5 points out of a possible 136 for using FSC-certified wood. Specifically, they can earn a half point each for

using FSC-certified wood in:

- Exterior wall framing
- Exterior wall siding
- Flooring
- Floor framing
- Interior wall framing
- Decking
- Cabinets
- Counters
- Doors
- Trim
- Window framing
- Roof framing
- Sheathing

“Six-and-a-half isn’t a huge number,” Root says. “But it’s not insignificant. There are four LEED tiers—certified, silver, gold and platinum—and because there are 15 points between each one, having all FSC-certified wood versus none gets you almost halfway to the next tier.”

Because the wood credits are relatively small, Root suggests, builders tend to like FSC-certified wood not necessarily because it’s eligible for LEED credit, but rather because it helps them market their projects to clients. “[When] trying to sell green homes, you want specific attributes you can point to,” he says.

### **The conflict over certified wood**

Because sustainable wood is more than a marketing gimmick, lumber producers want their sustainable products to be recognized more fully in LEED certification, according to Cassie Phillips, chair of the American Forest & Paper Association’s Green Building Coalition and vice president of sustainable forests and products for Weyerhaeuser, a Federal Way, Wash.-based forest products company.

“The wood credits have been a challenge ever since LEED started,” Phillips says. “If you do use wood, you only get credit if you use FSC-certified wood, which limits the amount of wood available considerably compared to the potential supply.”

Because the choices are limited—and the prices therefore high—many LEED builders decide not to use sustainable lumber at all, while those that do struggle to find suppliers.

“Retailers carry a lot of certified wood that’s not being recognized under the current LEED system,” Phillips says. “The builders using that wood aren’t able to get LEED credit for it, which is frustrating to everybody in the supply chain.”

### **Sustainable solutions**

To raise the profile on sustainable lumber, USGBC is considering changing its LEED wood credit language so that it recognizes other certification systems, such as those belonging to the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) and the American Tree Farm System (ATFS).

Under the proposed language—which was released for public comment last summer—LEED would recognize any wood certification program that meets measurable

benchmarks in the areas of governance, technical/standards substance, accreditation and auditing, and chain of custody and labeling.

“What they’ve said they’re doing is to establish criteria under which forest certification standards would qualify,” Phillips says. “They would no longer reference a specific system, but rather a specific set of criteria.”

Adds Root, “The USGBC has come out with a process to make certification systems other than FSC eligible to earn points under LEED, [as long as] they can also ensure that the current standard isn’t weakened. A non FSC-certification system might become eligible ... if it is deemed compliant with certain benchmarks.”

Although LEED closed its public comment period in September 2008 and hasn’t introduced any further action since, it’s expected that it could announce its wood credit decision soon. If that decision favors objective, system-blind standards, then SFI, ATFS and others can make necessary changes to their sustainable wood certifications, benefiting green builders in the process.

“If LEED recognizes the other wood certifications, builders’ lives should get much easier,” Phillips says. “They should be able to find wood that meets the criteria and therefore get involved in green building much more easily than they can today.”

For more information about LEED’s proposed certified wood credit changes, visit the [USGBC](#).