

# Compressive behavior of wood I-joist under elevated temperature

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(Received 12 June 2025)

**Abstract.** Wood composite I-joists are commonly used in residential construction and light commercial buildings, particularly in floor and roof assemblies. These assemblies are often fire-rated, based on building design, to meet specific safety standards. Fire-rated assemblies are constructed using manufacturer-specified materials such as gypsum board and fire-retardant plywood. While I-joists may not be directly exposed to flames, they can still experience significant thermal exposure. This study investigates the effects of elevated temperatures on the compressive strength and modulus of elasticity (MOE) of I-joists, with 90 specimens tested across various temperatures and two exposure durations. Results indicate that significant degradation in mechanical properties occurs around 190°C, with OSB web buckling identified as the primary failure mechanism. A Sigmoidal model was applied to capture the temperature-dependent degradation, revealing critical property decline near 200°C and higher. This research provides insights into the thermal behavior of I-joists, with implications for maintaining structural integrity in high-temperature environments, and highlights the need for further studies on long-term exposure and temperatures above 200°C.

**Keywords:** Wood composite I-joist; Compression strength; Elevated temperature

## Introduction

Wood-composite I-joists, first developed in the 1960s, gained widespread adoption in construction during the late 1980s and 1990s due to their efficiency and improved performance over traditional solid wood joists (Fisette 2000). These joists are constructed from two primary components, the flanges, typically made from laminated veneer lumber (LVL), which form the top and bottom horizontal sections, and the web, often made from oriented strand board (OSB), which forms the vertical section (Smulski 1997). This “I” cross-sectional shape, similar to that of steel I-beams, provides excellent load-bearing capabilities, making I-joists ideal for residential and light commercial applications.

The transition to wood-composite I-joists has been driven largely by their cost-effectiveness and superior mechanical

performance compared to solid wood joists. I-joists are manufactured from lower-cost tree species and smaller-diameter logs, reducing material costs while maintaining comparable strength to solid wood. In addition, their engineered design minimizes natural defects such as knots and splits, which are common in solid wood, resulting in more reliable structural performance (APA 2024a; Forest Products Laboratory 2010). Despite their increased popularity, some countries, including the United Kingdom and Canada, have implemented restrictions on I-joist usage due to concerns over fire performance. In the United States, certain jurisdictions have also considered limitations, though the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) has actively opposed such restrictions in 1999 and again in 2023 (NAHB 1999, 2023).

An important mechanical advantage of I-joists is that they span longer distances than traditional joists, allowing for larger open spaces in architectural designs, a feature that is highly valued in modern construction (APA 2024a). Moreover, I-joists exhibit superior dimensional stability, meaning they

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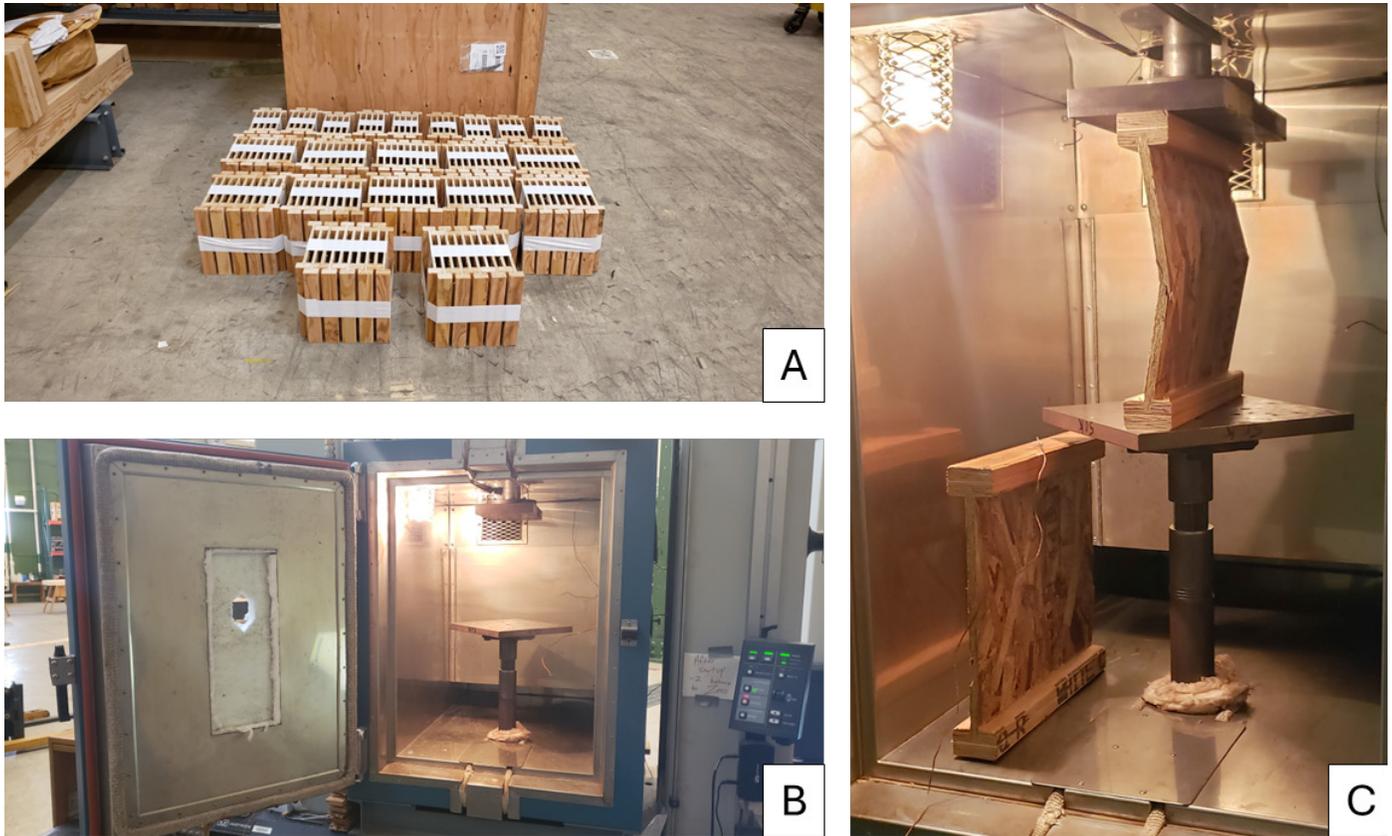


Figure 1. Samples and compression test setup. (A) I-Joist conditioned room; (B) Testing setup with BEMCO installed within INSTRON testing frame; (C) Typical specimen installation with tested specimen and heating specimen.

## Methods

Testing was conducted in accordance with ASTM D7672 (ASTM International 2014) Standard for Evaluating Structural Capacities of Rim Board Products and Assemblies. The tests were performed under uniform vertical load conditions using an INSTRON 5546, equipped with a Bemco environmental chamber integrated into the testing frame. The chamber had two access points, one at the top and the other at the bottom, allowing extension arms fitted with compression platens to extend from both the INSTRON testing base and crosshead, as shown in Figure 1b. This configuration allowed testing at elevated temperatures within the chamber while preventing any direct force from being applied to the Bemco chamber itself.

Thermocouples were installed in both the flange and web of the I-joists to monitor temperature. Two specimens were placed in the chamber, one for testing and the other for pre-heating (as shown in Figure 1c). Once the target temperature was reached for the specimen to be tested, the test was conducted. Afterward, the failed specimen was replaced by the pre-heated

one, and a new specimen was placed in the chamber to pre-heat. A slight temperature drop occurred during the transfer, so the specimens were reheated to ensure uniformity before testing. The flange required approximately 20–30 minutes to heat, while the web took 10–15 minutes. This timing allowed sufficient time for testing before the next specimen reached the target temperature. Testing commenced once both the flange and web achieved the target temperature.

Tests were performed at nine temperatures, ranging from 120°C to 200°C, with 10°C increments. Two testing durations were used: one immediately after the specimen reached the prescribed temperature, and the other after 50 minutes of exposure. Once the specimen reached the target temperature and time, it was preloaded to approximately 170 N and tested at a rate of 1.25 mm/min until failure. Force measurements were taken from a 300 kN load cell attached to the INSTRON crosshead, and deflection was measured via crosshead displacement.

Following testing, both the compressive strength and compressive modulus of elasticity (MOE) of the I-joist were calculated.

Compressive strength ( $\sigma_c$ ) was determined using the following equation:

$$\sigma_c = \frac{F_{max}}{A} \quad [1]$$

Where,  $\sigma_c$  is the compressive strength in MPa,  $F_{max}$  was the maximum applied force, and  $A$  is the cross-sectional area of the OSB web.

The compressive modulus of elasticity ( $E$ ) was calculated using the following equation:

$$E = \frac{\Delta F}{d * \Delta \delta} \quad [2]$$

Where,  $E$  is the modulus of elasticity of the I-joist,  $\Delta F$  is the change in load (N) within the elastic region,  $\Delta \delta$  is the change in deflection (mm) in the elastic region, and  $d$  is the thickness of the OSB web in mm. The elastic range used for  $\Delta F$  and  $\Delta \delta$ , was approximately 10%–40% of the maximum force.

## Results and Discussion

The results for compressive strength and compressive MOE of the I-joists are presented in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively. Table 2 provides the average compressive strength at each tested temperature, while Table 3 displays the average MOE for each temperature. These results offer a detailed compari-

son of how temperature affects both the strength and stiffness properties of the I-joists.

When examining the influence of exposure time on both compressive strength and stiffness, the results suggest that exposure duration did not significantly degrade these properties over time. This conclusion is supported by T-tests conducted at each temperature to compare the two exposure durations. For compressive strength, no significant differences were observed between exposure times except at 140°C (p-value = 0.01). A similar pattern was found for MOE, with a statistically significant difference only at 160°C (p-value = 0.02). These p-values are reported in Tables 2 and 3.

The stability of mechanical properties under elevated temperatures is likely due to the heat-resistant adhesive used in the I-joists, which meets ASTM D5055 (ASTM International 2021) standards and undergoes performance evaluation under ASTM D7247 (ASTM International 2017). Although the I-joists themselves are not rated for specific fire durations, their performance under high temperatures is considered during fire-rating assessments of complete assemblies.

To further investigate the effect of elevated temperatures on I-joist properties, a statistical analysis was conducted to assess whether significant differences exist across various temperature levels. The data was subsequently modeled using a Sigmoidal non-linear model to capture the temperature-dependent behavior of I-joists. The Sigmoidal function, which

Table 2. Average compressive strength of I-joists at elevated temperatures.

Time	Stats	Exposure temperature (°C)								
		120	130	140	150	160	170	180	190	200
0 min	Mean (MPa)	1369	1268	1481	1209	1223	1254	1098	1021	739
	StaDev (MPa)	116	120	134	68	147	140	113	59	32
50 min	Mean (MPa)	1452	1477	1431	1269	1365	1215	1189	1103	852
	StaDev (MPa)	123	90	105	45	157	46	91	108	97
T-test p-values		0.30	0.01	0.53	0.13	0.18	0.58	0.20	0.18	0.06

Table 3. Average compressive MOE of I-joists at elevated temperatures.

Time	Stats	Exposure temperature (°C)								
		120	130	140	150	160	170	180	190	200
0 min	Mean (MPa)	4520	3284	4449	4101	3938	3977	3723	3435	2377
	StaDev (MPa)	494	1934	268	444	101	512	313	391	150
50 min	Mean (MPa)	4955	4735	4720	4173	4607	4076	3978	3839	2810
	StaDev (MPa)	448	264	563	465	420	253	641	479	534
T-test p-values		0.26	0.28	0.36	0.79	0.02	0.77	0.52	0.33	0.15

exhibits an “S-shaped” curve, is typically applied to processes that start slowly, accelerate, and then slow down again, such as growth and dose-response relationships (Weisstein 2007; Sánchez-Jiménez et al. 2022). This model effectively fits the thermal degradation behavior of materials under increasing temperatures.

Prior to the statistical analysis, the data for compressive strength and stiffness were evaluated for homogeneity of variance (Flinger test,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ) and normality (Shapiro-Wilk test,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). Both tests confirmed that the data met the assumptions of equal variance ( $p > 0.05$ ) and normal distribution ( $p > 0.05$ ). Subsequently, analysis of variance (ANOVA,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ) was performed to detect significant differences in properties across temperature groups. The ANOVA revealed a significant influence of temperature on both compressive strength and stiffness, with clear trends emerging at each exposure time.

To further examine pairwise differences between temperatures, Tukey’s post-hoc tests were applied. The results were then modeled using the Sigmoidal function:

$$\sigma_{c \text{ or } E} = \frac{a}{(1 + \exp(b * (t - c)))} \quad [3]$$

Where  $\sigma_c$  represents the compressive strength (kPa),  $E$  is the modulus of elasticity (MPa),  $a$  is the maximum property value observed at the lowest tested temperature,  $t$  is temperature ( $^{\circ}\text{C}$ ),  $b$  controls the rate of degradation after the critical temperature, and  $c$  denotes the critical temperature at which rapid degradation begins. Both  $b$  and  $c$  were estimated by fitting the model to the data using the Levenberg-Marquardt nonlinear algorithm in R (RStudio Team 2023). Model parameters and  $R^2$  values are summarized in Table 4.

To visualize these results, boxplots were created for both compressive strength and MOE, showing the results of the Tukey tests. Each box is annotated with letters indicating statistical differences between temperatures; boxes sharing the same letters do not differ significantly. A red dashed line represents the fitted Sigmoidal model, with the equation and

model parameters displayed in the top right corner of each plot, as seen in Figure 2.

The TUKEY test results for compressive strength revealed a predictable decline with increasing temperature, with significant degradation becoming apparent at  $180^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Specifically, beyond  $180^{\circ}\text{C}$ , compressive strength at higher temperatures showed statistically significant differences compared to lower temperatures, indicating the onset of notable thermal degradation. Similarly, the MOE exhibited a decreasing trend, with significant differences observed at  $200^{\circ}\text{C}$  for both exposure times.

The Sigmoidal model provided further insights into the degradation pattern. It demonstrated a gradual decline in compressive strength and MOE at lower temperatures, followed by accelerated degradation at higher temperatures. The model’s critical temperature parameter ( $c$ ) indicated that significant degradation occurred around or slightly above  $200^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The model fit the data well, with  $R^2$  values ranging from 0.81 to 0.90, validating its suitability for representing the non-linear degradation trends observed in materials exposed to high temperatures. This approach aligns with previous studies on the thermal degradation of materials but has not been widely applied to wood-based composites (Pan et al. 2024; Li and Kasal 2022).

Both the statistical analysis (Tukey test) and the Sigmoidal model indicated a significant reduction in I-joist mechanical properties—compressive strength and MOE—between  $190^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $210^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Compressive failures were primarily attributed to buckling of the OSB web, with some failures involving prying of the LVL, which was likely caused by OSB flexure, followed by buckling, as seen in Figure 3. These findings are consistent with established degradation patterns of OSB, which begins to degrade between  $175^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $200^{\circ}\text{C}$  (Sinha et al. 2011; Sugahara et al. 2022; Miyamoto and Sinha 2025). The thermal degradation of OSB can be attributed to both the decomposition of wood components, such as hemicellulose, and the breakdown of adhesives. Hemicellulose degradation typically begins at  $170^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $200^{\circ}\text{C}$ , contributing to the observed loss in mechanical properties (Dietenberger and Hasburgh 2016; Sinha 2013). Additionally, the dramatic drop in mechanical properties at  $200^{\circ}\text{C}$  may be linked to the degradation of the polymeric methylene diphenyl diisocyanate (PMDI) adhesive used in OSB, which also begins to degrade around  $200^{\circ}\text{C}$  (Desai and O’Dell 1989; Yang et al. 1986).

To assess whether the Sigmoidal model would also be effective at lower temperatures, it was fitted to both the elevated temperature data and manufacturer-supplied compressive

Table 4. Fitted parameters for compressive strength and MOE.

exposure	Strength Parameters				MOE Parameters			
	a	b	c	$R^2$	a	b	c	$R^2$
0 min.	1345	0.066	204	0.871	4520	0.053	206	0.924
50 min.	1477	0.043	210	0.927	4813	0.050	210	0.883

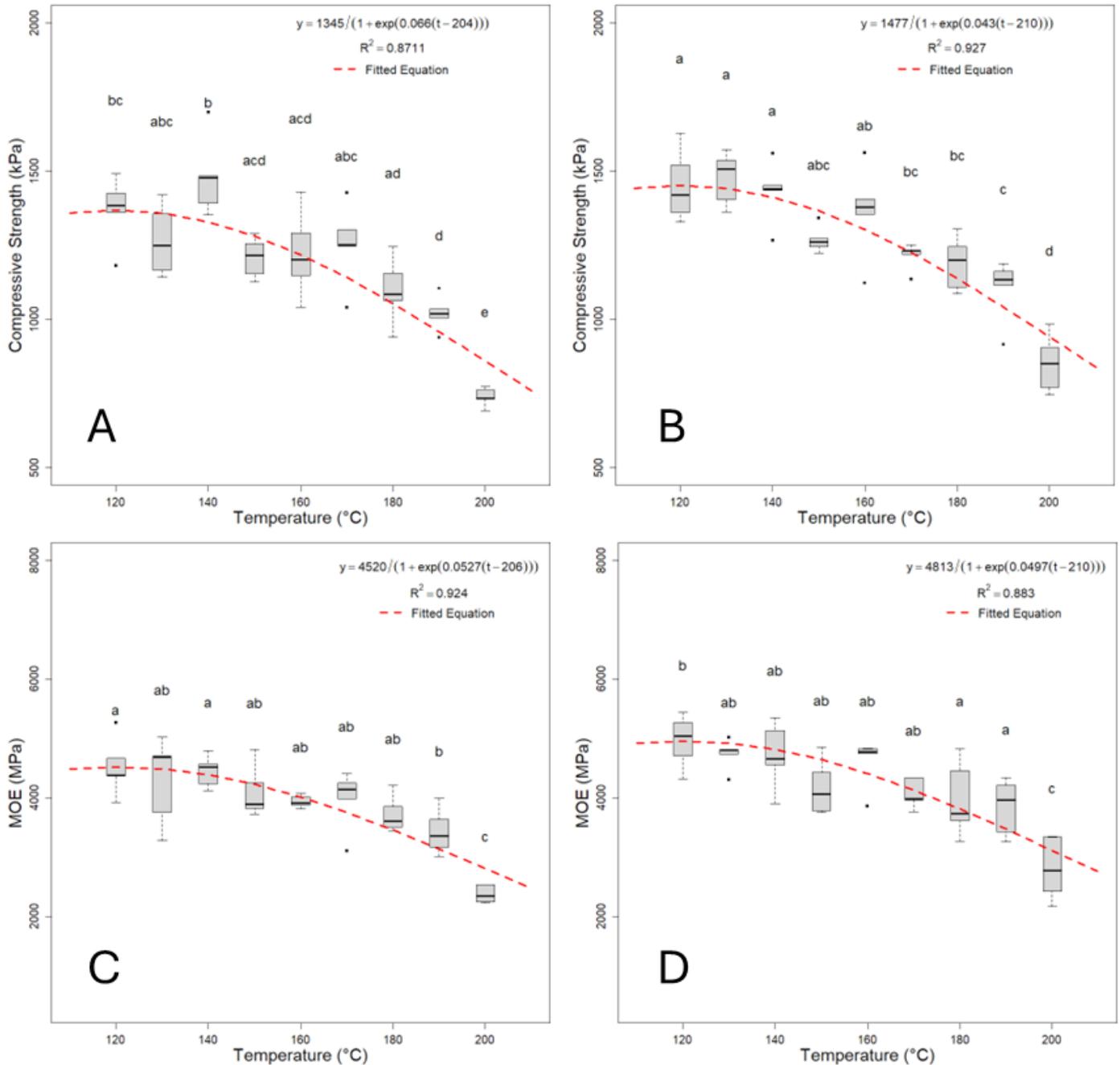


Figure 2. TUKEY test results for compressive strength at 0 min. (A) and 50 min (B) exposure times, and MOE at 0 min. (C) and 50 min. (D) exposure times, with the fitted Sigmoidal function model at both exposure times.

strength and MOE data for ambient conditions. This broader fitting provided a more comprehensive understanding of I-joint performance across a wide temperature range. The extended model results are shown in Figure 4.

The fitted parameters for the Sigmoidal model are shown in the top right corner of the graphs in Figure 4. The model demonstrated a good fit to the data, with  $R^2$  values of 0.935 for compressive strength and 0.9147 for MOE. The shape of the

curve is consistent with expectations, as thermal degradation is anticipated to commence at temperatures above 80°C and gradually progress, with accelerated degradation occurring at higher temperatures, such as 180°C to 200°C. While the model captures this general behavior, it may indicate the onset of thermal degradation at lower temperatures than expected. This model thus shows that it could be used as an empirical material model for thermal degradation.

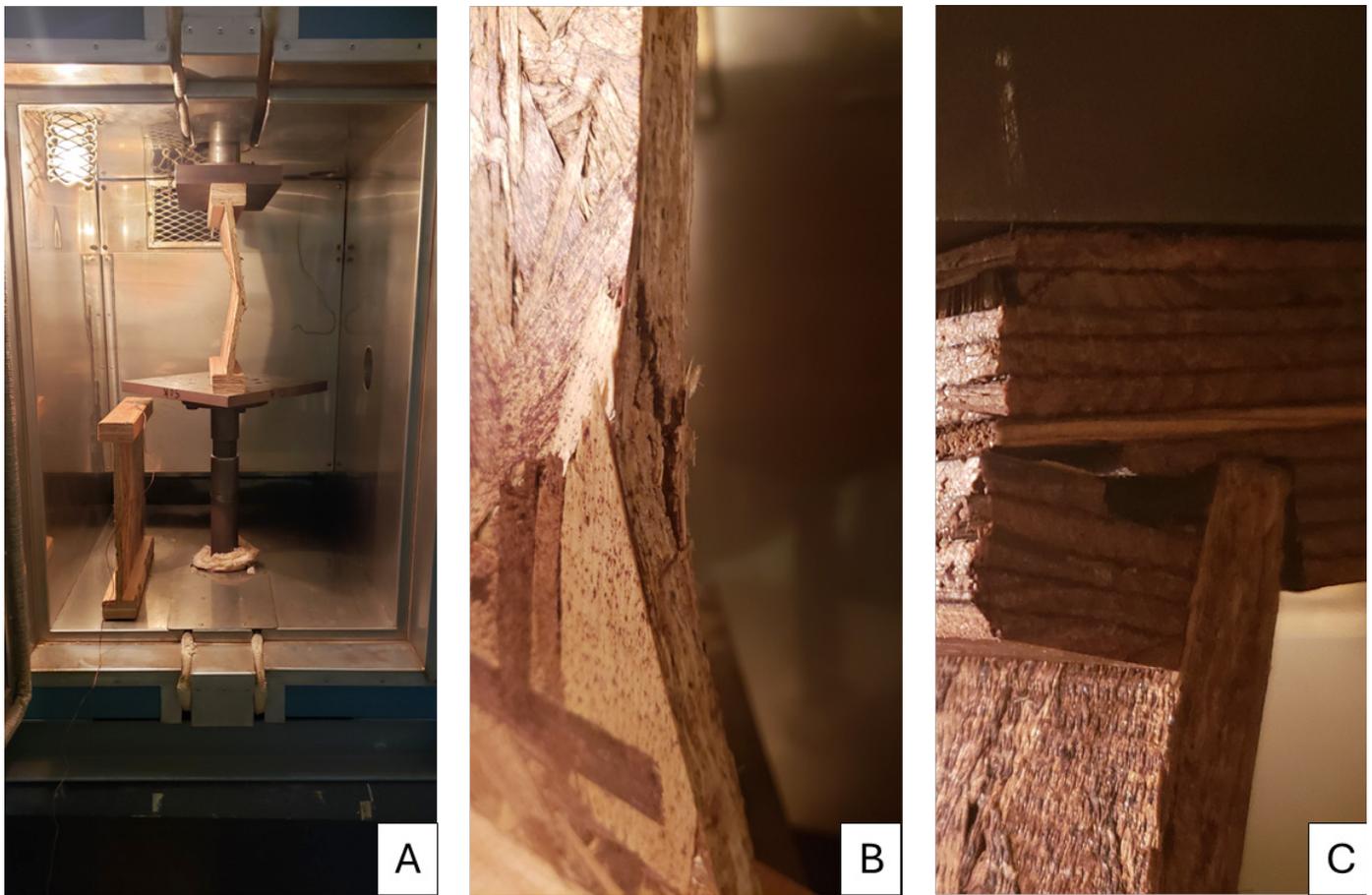


Figure 3. I-joint failure types. (A) Typical tested specimen failing in buckling; (B) OSB buckling failure; (C) LVL prying failure.

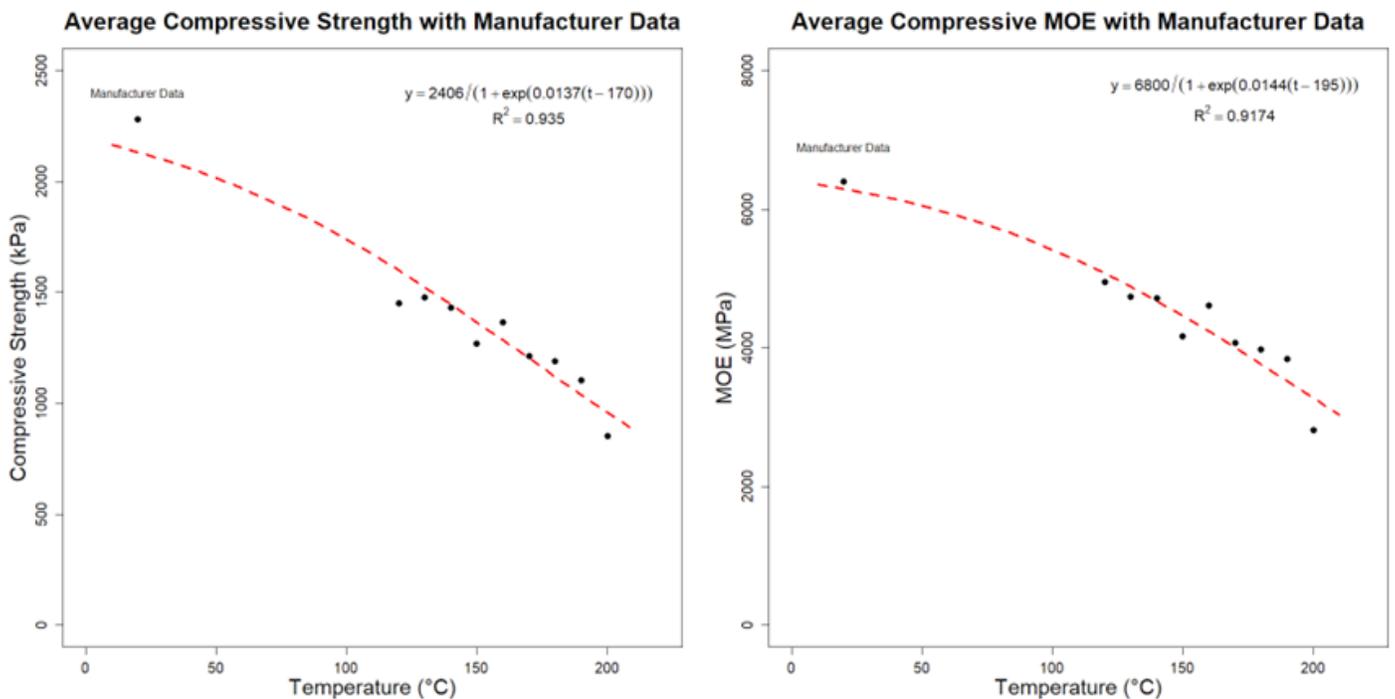


Figure 4. (A) Average compressive strength and (B) MOE at elevated temperatures and manufacturer data at room temperature with the fitted Sigmoidal function.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the compressive properties of wooden I-joists under elevated temperatures. I-joists were tested at nine different temperatures, ranging from 120°C to 200°C, with two exposure times: one right when the specimen reached the target temperature and the other after 50 minutes of exposure. The tests followed a uniform vertical loading protocol in compression.

The results revealed that the OSB web was the primary failure mechanism, typically failing due to buckling. The two key properties evaluated were compressive strength and MOE. Both properties indicated significant thermal degradation beginning at approximately 190°C, with a drastic increase in degradation rates observed at 200°C. Interestingly, the comparison of the two exposure times showed no statistically significant differences. This suggests that temperature is the primary factor driving degradation, rather than the duration of exposure at high temperatures.

To further analyze the temperature-dependent behavior of the I-joists, a Sigmoidal model was fitted to the data. The model demonstrated a good fit, with  $R^2$  values ranging from 0.81 to 0.90. The model also indicated that critical thermal degradation occurred primarily at temperatures of 200°C and above. An additional model fitting was performed, incorporating manufacturer data for I-joists tested at room temperature. This extended fit showed strong agreement, with  $R^2$  values of 0.93 and 0.91 for compressive strength and MOE, respectively.

Future investigations into the compressive strength of I-joists at elevated temperatures should consider longer exposure durations to identify the critical time points at which compressive properties begin to degrade, as the two exposure times used in this study did not show significant differences. Additionally, testing at temperatures beyond 200°C, such as 220°C, would help validate the occurrence of thermal degradation at higher temperatures and could further refine the Sigmoidal model. Moreover, the effects of sustained constant loading on I-joists at elevated temperatures over extended exposure periods, such as 2 hours, should be explored to gain a deeper understanding of the long-term thermal behavior of these materials.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the Wood-Based Composites Center and the NSF INTERN program for funding this project.

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