

# WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF WOOD SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME 29

JULY 1997

NUMBER 3

## RESEARCH RELEVANCE

The United States has a rich history of wood use for a myriad of reasons that we are all familiar with: it is a plentiful resource, it is a relatively easy material to process, it is easy to work with, it has beauty and warmth, and many more. We have also had a long history of research on wood—its properties, processing, genetics and growth characteristics, species variation, and so on. I am often asked why we continue to do more research when we know so much already. My simple answer is that what we know is enough to generate more questions and that the wood resource is not static: we are continually changing the way that we grow trees, the types of trees we grow, the ways we process wood products, the types of end products that are produced, the ways we recycle wood products, and the way we mix wood and other materials to create new products.

At the same time that all of these changes are going on, major changes in forest land management have been taking place. Concerns about the health and diversity of forests and ecosystems within North America are increasing. Management where wood production was a primary focus is being critically challenged on most of our federal and other public lands and to some extent even on private lands. The current questions with high priority are: How do we protect endangered species or protect clean water and maintain or restore health to our ecosystems?

How does this relate to wood science and technology? I think that it is critical that we show the relevance of wood science research to land managers, policymakers, and even to the public. While the debate has raged over

land allocation (land that is designated for single use), economics and ecology (jobs vs. spotted owls), and the biological health and diversity of flora and fauna on the broad policy level, there comes a time when new methods and techniques and ideas need to be implemented on the ground. This is our great opportunity to show the relevance of forest products research. It is our challenge to make our results understandable and applicable to the current debates.

There have been, and will continue to be, major shifts in the amount and types of wood harvests from North American timberlands. What is important is that we show how our research is helping land managers and the public continue to have affordable wood houses, furniture, and paper products that are ecologically sustainable. We have to show how our research in areas such as harvesting systems for small diameter trees and wood/plastic composites from recycled material can extend the forest resource while at the same time protecting the environment. We need to redefine our role in the context of ecosystem management and truly forge a multiple use system where all resources are kept in perspective. It is tempting to throw the wood out with the forest in our rush to embrace a new paradigm; that is why it is so important that individuals knowledgeable in wood and its competitive and comparative advantages make sure that this information is not forgotten in the surge to reform.

SUE WILLITS

*USDA Forest Service  
Pacific Northwest Research Station  
Portland, OR 97208-3890*