The Press, Christchurch
21 Jan 2015, by Jo Goodhew

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COMMENT

Time to lobby for lumber

The Christchurch rebuild has seen new timber technologies used in commercial buildings and homes. JO GOODHEW, Associate Minister for Primary Industries, writes that effort is needed to boost their use.

With the Government's goal of doubling the value of exports by 2025, there is a lot of talk right now about "value added" exports.

Forestry is our third-biggest export industry, after dairy and meat, and offers significant opportunities for growth by adding value to manufactured and exported products.

Recent growth in the forestry sector has come from an increase in the available wood, and increased harvesting in response to strong demand and good prices in our main export markets, in particular China. But like many of our primary industries, forestry needs to increase the value of the products exported. Between 1992 and 2012 the volume of forestry products exported increased by 106 per cent, but revenue rose by just 12 per cent.

There is a significant opportunity to process more logs here, into more valuable products.

Global consumer demand for sustainable timber products is increasing, and consumers want quality, seismically-resilient and affordable construction. Engineered timber is one such solution, and New Zealand is well-placed to supply the products, and the know-how behind them.

Those in the industry know this is nothing new. There are pockets of businesses and industries specialising in engineered timber products and prefabrication.

Development of these industries could lead to faster and more efficient home builds, and warmer, safer houses.

An example of an engineered timber product is cross-laminated timber (CLT). CLT is sawn timber glued in crossed layers to add strength and stability, which is then cut into building panels. The panels are made to precise dimensions, can be assembled quickly on-site, and are stronger than steel.

Companies require a good foundation in the domestic market from which to develop, and the Christchurch rebuild has been a prime opportunity. Christchurch-based business Welhaus, Mike Greer Homes, and Nelson based X-Lam are gaining traction in the domestic market.

Welhaus has around 70 construction projects underway using their customisable panel housing products. New apartments in Salisbury St in Christchurch are expected to be assembled in just a few weeks using CLT panels from Nelson company X-Lam.

Commercially, the Trimble Building in Christchurch has been seen as a landmark project. It integrates laminated veneer beams made from sustainably grown timber, with low-damage building technologies developed here at the University of Canterbury. The result is a building that will dissipate energy in an earthquake and be economical to repair, while looking and feeling great.

In order to grow the sector we need to be aware of the shortfalls and blockages. Over the last few years, Government has invested millions of dollars in building knowledge and expertise on the use of engineered timber, as well as lifting its profile.

A recent survey commissioned by the Ministry for Primary Industries asked the owners, architects, engineers and builders involved in engineered timber buildings in Christchurch to identify the issues they faced. The survey indicated that supply chain blockages, skills shortages, information gaps, biases and manufacturing capacity are all slowing the growth of engineered timber use in New Zealand.

In 2015 there will be new opportunities to work with industry to address these shortcomings, and raise awareness of the benefits of these products to the wider market.

The further development of the domestic market will provide a good base from which to develop export markets for high value wood products and building solutions.

There are many excellent examples of innovative businesses in this field all over New Zealand, but many are operating on a small scale and in isolation from one another. Raising awareness of the synergies of working together, combined with the Christchurch rebuild, may bring about significant opportunities.

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Timber technology: Laminated Veneer Lumber frames Victoria St office building Young Hunter House, pictured during construction in 2012.

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Wood on show: The Arcades, on the old Crowne Plaza site in central Christchurch, is a 6m high installation made from Glulam engineered timber.