

■ LUMBER 411

By Matt Pomeroy

NELMA[®]

A Special Series from
Northeastern Lumber
Manufacturers Association

There will be a test



WHEN YOU SELL a stick of lumber to a builder, what are you really selling? Studs for wall framing? Floor and ceiling joists? Roof trusses? All of these are everyday uses for lumber... but look deeper. How much do you know about the testing and monitoring that goes on behind the scenes to ensure each stick of lumber will perform for that builder based on its grade and strength value as published? And why should you care about lumber testing and monitoring??

Think of the program like this: You've seen the ubiquitous UL symbol for Underwriters' Laboratory on the back of appliances? The lumber testing and monitoring program is the UL for the lumber industry, on behalf of the end user. The goal: to make sure the strength values for each species of lumber are accurately presented to the end user, the entire building community.

The lumber testing and monitoring program as we know it was first launched in 2013. It was officially established by the American Lumber Standard Committee (ALSC) for all lumber grade rules-writing agencies across the U.S. and Canada—six groups total. Can you name them? The Southern Pine Inspection Bureau (SPIB); the Western Wood Products Association (WWPA); Pacific Lumber Inspection Bureau (PLIB); Redwood Inspection Service (RIS); and the Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association (NELMA) in the US. In Canada, it's the National Lumber Grading Authority of Canada (NLGA). These grading agencies publish grade rule books for each of the species they represent; this is the bible, as it determines where each piece of wood can be used, for what purpose, and how much of a load it can carry in various construction uses.

These six groups are tasked with monitoring and testing lumber strength values every five years.

How It Works

Let's follow a stick of wood throughout the entire testing and monitoring process to show you how it works.

It all starts with the development of a lumber sampling plan—by each agency that must be approved by the ALSC. Based on specific testing protocols, a geographic representative sampling of lumber for the species or species grouping published by the rules-writing agency is pulled by agency graders from random mills. The selection is completely random, and each piece is graded on the spot by expert graders to ensure it is No. 2 (the grade of lumber prescribed in the testing protocol and the most widely available grade). Sample sizes vary from 150 to 300 sticks of lumber, depending on an agency's approved plan and the species type.

From here, the stick goes on a trip! All samples are transported to a certified lab—some agencies have their own, other agencies use an outside accredited lab source, like the University of Maine—where they are submitted to rigorous testing in bending. Results in the lab are analyzed, then compared to existing published strength values and shared with ALSC for further review. If strength values remain the same—the ultimate goal—nothing is done, and plans are made to retest in another five years. If strength values are lower than published, then a second round of testing is completed. Should this added data also come out lower, then strength values for that species are adjusted and the information communicated across the industry as quickly and completely as possible.

The entire testing and monitoring process, from plan creation to result reporting, takes 12 to 16 months.

Now, why should you as a retailer care about the process of lumber testing and monitoring? Because it shows that the lumber industry has your back. You want every piece of wood you sell to a customer to perform exactly as it should; happy customers = happy dealers. This rigorous testing and monitoring process ensures that no matter what kind of lumber you sell, you can be confident in knowing that it will perform as expected. Every. Single. Time.

The more you know!

— Matt Pomeroy is director of inspection services for Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association. Reach him at info@nelma.org.