



# THE NATIONAL GRADING RULE AND WHY IT MATTERS

A SPECIAL SERIES FROM **NELMA**

— BY JEFF EASTERLING

**IF YOU'VE EVER** wondered how the lumber grading industry works, read on. This is some fascinating “behind the curtain” information.

The U.S. and Canadian lumber industries are driven and defined by a finite set of rules and interpretations set forth by the American Lumber Standard Committee. For lumber used in construction, this information is called the National Grading Rule, and without it, consumers would lose the consistency and confidence it provides when building with today’s most environmentally friendly and user-friendly material.

Let’s dig a little deeper.

## What Is the National Grading Rule?

The National Grading Rules Committee, composed of members knowledgeable in the field of lumber technology, is called upon to “establish, maintain and make fully and fairly available nomenclature and descriptions of grades for dimension lumber.” Further, “grading rules of an agency shall not be certified as conforming to the American Softwood Lumber Standard if the Board of Review determines that the dimension lumber rules therein fail to conform to the provisions of the National Grading Rule for dimension lumber.”

In a nutshell: A group of lumber experts representing the five U.S. grade rules writing agencies and the one Canadian rules writer meet regularly to ensure that the lumber you sell, and your customers buy, will perform exactly as expected. What this group publishes, watches over, and updates

as necessary is like a cookbook that dictates what goes into a properly graded piece of lumber.

## Dimension Lumber, Classifications

Dimension lumber is defined in the National Grading Rule as surfaced softwood lumber of nominal thicknesses from 2” through 4” and nominal widths of 2” and wider which is designed for framing (joists, planks, rafters, studs). Not included in this grouping: special products such as crossarms, foundation lumber, laminating stock, rough lumber, railroad stock, ship decking, and more.

As part of the National Grading Rule for Dimension Lumber, the wood is divided into three width categories and four use categories. Dimension up to 4” wide is “structural light framing” and “light framing.” Dimension lumber 2” and wider is “studs.” If the pieces of dimension lumber are five inches and wider, this is classified as “structural joists and planks.”

Additional interpretations of the lumber grading procedures include definitions and parameters for knots and the like, how they should be measured, and how they should be applied to determine the grade.

It’s interesting to note that the exact language used in the National Grading Rule is echoed in the grade rule books of all six grading agencies—NELMA, WWPA, SPIB, Redwood Inspection Service, PLIB, and NLGA.

The use of the same language and the same interpretations ensures the proper grade is applied consistently to each and every piece of lumber

produced, whether it’s southern pine or Douglas fir.

## Let’s Take a Field Trip

To explain in greater detail, let’s follow an SPF’s 2x6 as it goes through the process: A log is harvested and sent to a mill, where it’s cut into a piece of dimension lumber, in this case, a 2x6. It’s then dried and planed before it is graded by either a human or a machine. Using the criteria set forth within the National Grade Rule and its interpretations, the 2x6 is assigned an official grade. The lumber is then sold to a customer that will then apply the appropriate published strength properties based on the grade of the piece that will determine how it may be used in construction.

Grading is a critical component within the manufacturing process, and the National Grading Rule is the backbone. It provides the basis on how important end-use decisions are made for building with confidence.

For more information on the National Grading Rule, please open the camera on your phone, hold it over the QR code at the top of the page, and click on the link that appears.



**JEFF EASTERLING**

Jeff Easterling is president of the Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association, Cumberland Center, Me. Reach him at [info@nelma.org](mailto:info@nelma.org).