



# THE LUMBER INSPECTION PROCESS

A SPECIAL  
SERIES  
FROM  
NELMA<sup>®</sup>

— BY MATT POMEROY

**EACH TIME** you reach for a stick of lumber to sell, do you ever think about the grading process? As a lumber retailer, you trust that the piece will perform as graded; as a lumber grading agency, our job is to ensure that each piece will perform as graded. Let's take a quick trip through the basic lumber grading process from an inspector's viewpoint so that next time you grab a piece of eastern white pine or SPFs, you know everything you need to know!

The first thing to understand: there is no cookie-cutter, turn-key grading process. How lumber is graded at a mill depends on what the mills are doing: are they producing dimension lumber or appearance grades? Heat-treated? Kiln Dried? These specifications will dictate the grading and grade-marking processes set into place for that mill. But the interesting part? Grade rules may vary by product type, but the standards for compliance are the same.

NELMA inspectors conduct inspections 12 times a year, at minimum. Each inspection is random and unannounced: the mills have no idea an inspector is about to show up until they walk through the door. The inspector knows what each mill produces and has set expectations of what to expect for each mill.

Once they've arrived at the mill, the inspector meets with key supervisory personnel. Randomly selected items of various grades and sizes from current production are pulled and inspected to ensure the grade mark matches the quality of the piece of lumber. The inspector will also verify that grade stamps are applied legibly to each piece and that it's labeled properly. Of note: inspectors are only concerned with the stamps on the boards, not the labels on the final packaging. Should a piece of wood not be labeled properly, the stamp is obliterated until the board can be regraded.

Each grade has a range between the lowest and the next highest, with set specifics within each grade that define how each grade should look. An example: not every #2 board looks alike, but if the limiting characteristics fall within the same parameters stated in the grade rules, they will be graded the same. This is an important piece of information to understand the next time a customer gets upset about the way a piece of wood looks.

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**AS A LUMBER RETAILER, YOU TRUST THAT THE PIECE WILL PERFORM AS GRADED.**

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After several items have been inspected, the inspector will review with mill supervisory personnel all below-grade pieces that were pulled. Mills are required to be 95% on-grade. If they come in more than 5% off-grade, random inspections will increase in frequency until the mill's off-grade is found to be less than 5%. If that number reaches 7.5% off-grade, the incorrect lot of lumber will be held for correction, and the inspection frequency is also increased. The improperly graded lumber cannot be shipped until proper grading has been verified by the inspector.

A mill's performance is evaluated on an inspection-by-inspection basis, and they are expected to maintain an acceptable level of below-grade. There are warning systems in place to ensure mills have a vested interest in maintaining compliance with the grading requirements.