

Colorblind? Be Green.

BY DAVE WITHEE

It is easy to be blinded by all the dazzle out there related to “green” on casework projects. So, let me try to simplify it a bit for you.

- **It’s the right thing to do.** As a customer told me nine years ago, “we are doing this to leave a better planet for our kids and for their kids.” That’s the way we see it, also.
- **Most people know just enough to be dangerous.** So this is our opportunity to add value and help them be better at what they do.
- **LEED® is big.** Most of what you see for projects is a requirement to help obtain LEED certification. LEED is a certification program, sponsored by the U.S. Green Building Council. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.
- **LEED does not certify products.** LEED is a system to certify buildings as meeting different levels of sustainable design, construction and operation. Materials and Environmental Air Quality are just two of the areas in which projects may be awarded points toward certification.
- **It’s LEED, not LEEDS.** When you use the latter it’s obvious you don’t have a clue what you are talking about.
- **Wood casework cannot earn LEED points.** Read that again. NO product earns LEED points. Products help projects earn LEED points.

Wood casework can help earn points in any of several ways:

- *Chain of Custody* – this means the wood has been grown, harvested, processed and fabricated into finished products by companies that have a process in place to ensure everything is done in a sustainable fashion. LEED does not certify this process. USGBC does not certify the process. The Forest Stewardship Council has a certification requirement, but FSC does not

certify the process. FSC licenses other firms to do the certification (it is a not-for-profit vs profit issue with the tax authorities). SCS and Smartwood are U.S. licensees. (FSC was created to save the rainforests, which is good, but I’m pretty certain the wood used on our industry is unlikely to be coming from the rainforest!) Half of all the wood on the project must have CofC in order to earn this point. Only 12% of all LEED certified projects earn this point, often because structural wood does not have certification. CofC wood does cost more. The DWI CofC number is SCS-COC-002263.

- *Rapidly renewable* – this means materials are used that are grown and harvested in ten years or less. Typically this is not viable. The only current material I know of that is eligible for this material is bamboo. Is it really sustainable, though, since it takes a lot of fuel to ship it here from China? I know of only one (but there may be others) U.S. panel maker of rapidly renewable core material, but they don’t respond to inquiries and don’t appear to have a relationship with anyone who veneers panels. Not a good option.
- *Recycled material* – this typically will be in particleboard materials. Not the best for wood casework (except for door and drawer fronts).
- *VOC emissions* – this is in the air quality section. A good finish helps with this, and we have the best. Flat line finish doesn’t need a carrier like spray systems do to get the finish onto the wood. The carrier typically has some solvent (even water based systems do) and that is where the VOCs come from. VOCs are volatile organic compounds, which turn gaseous at room temperatures and at some level are known to cause cancer. Not nice, so it becomes an area where we can help earn LEED points with our flat line finish.
- *Formaldehyde emissions* – also in the air

quality section. Formaldehyde is a VOC and is also linked to asthma. By the way, the incidence of asthma in our kids is twice the rate of twenty years ago. Formaldehyde is used everywhere because it is inexpensive and helps bind things together very well, like all those little pieces of wood that make up particleboard. Formaldehyde is also created by every living organic creature—even by you as you read this, and by the plants in your office. So, there will always be some minor amount of atmospheric formaldehyde around, but we don't need to add to it. The rest of the world used to snicker at the U.S. because our formaldehyde restrictions were so loose; that's not the case any more. California targeted formaldehyde. The California Air Resources Board (CARB) has issued rulings that make their formaldehyde emissions rules arguably the toughest in the world. Manufacturers of wood products and fabricators like DWI have had to decide on whether to have two product lines—one for California and one for the rest of the country—or just convert everything. The odds are CARB will become a national standard. Pretty much everyone is just converting everything. DWI materials are already CARB compliant. This is an easier point to earn than is the CofC point. It is also a more important point; as a taxpayer would you rather help fight asthma in your kids or save the rainforest?

- **LEED is not the only game in town!** There are several other programs that compete with LEED, the most important of which is CHPS, the Collaborative for High Performance Schools. Created in California, it is used in eleven states as the official, certifiable “green” program for schools, including California, Texas, New York, Colorado, Washington and the New England states. If you are in these states, you need to get to know CHPS.

- **Here's a secret: not all sustainable schools get LEED certified!** It is expensive and cumbersome to get all the paperwork together and certified by the USGBC. Increasingly projects—especially schools—are becoming LEED-certifiable but not LEED-certified. In this economy people want to do the right thing, but they have to be cost-effective. So they ask, “Do we really need that plaque on the wall? We can save a lot of money by following the LEED guidelines and just not getting the plaque.”

- **So, what do specs call for?** No matter what the spec says, many times all they are really asking is, “Please tell me which of the LEED points you can help us earn.” That's exactly what our staff will tell you, and guide you through cost ramifications. You can then verify with the architect the options and we all go on from there!

I hope this has helped you understand just a little better and differentiate between the many shades of green that are out there!