



NEWS RELEASE

USDA FOREST SERVICE • FOREST PRODUCTS LABORATORY

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Checking out the action underneath the action
at this year's NCAA tournament

Innovative partnership hopes to be one of the Cinderella stories at the NCAA Final Four

Madison, Wis.— Though most of them are a bit short, can't hit the jumper, and certainly won't be one of Dick Vitale's "Diaper Dandies," researchers at the USDA Forest Service's Forest Products Laboratory (FPL) have played a highly visible (but let's say "supporting") role in this year's men's NCAA basketball tournament...and the women's tournament...even the NBA All-Star game. In fact, even though most of them probably haven't (and probably couldn't have) played a full court game in years, they've had a major "impact" at just about all the big basketball venues.

It doesn't get as much attention as the breathtaking athleticism being displayed on the court, but the wooden floor underneath the action is an important part of the game. Just ask a Boston Celtics fan how important it is to still visualize Cousy, Russell and Havlicek driving to the rim on the beautiful parquet floor of the old Boston Garden.

You could make a case that the floor is even more important in today's game. Given the fact that NBA teams have invested millions of dollars in their players, and that college players someday hope to make some of those millions, it's imperative that they play on a sound, professionally constructed surface. To say it must be durable is an understatement. To help visualize the pounding a floor must withstand, imagine having Shaquille O'Neal jump up and down in your living room 50 times a day for a few years. And since most major coliseums are home to more than one team or event (it's not unusual to have a hockey game, rock concert and basketball game in the same week) it's also imperative that the surface be easy and quick to set-up and take down.

As with most wood manufacturing businesses, the wood flooring business is very competitive. One of the oldest and most successful is the Horner Flooring Company of Dollar Bay, Mich. Horner has been around since 1891, the same year James Naismith invented basketball. Horner specializes in making high-

end portable hardwood flooring surfaces for many NBA and NCAA venues. In fact, every NBA All-Star Game and NCAA Final Four since 1983 has been played on a Horner floor.

Secondary wood manufacturing industry faces tough times

Like many rural states, the wood products industry is one of the primary economic drivers for the Western Great Lakes region of Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin, employing more than 300,000 people. Horner employs more than 100 people at its' headquarters in Northern Michigan. The factory is one important outlet for the hardwoods from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. However, the wood products industry, not only there, but all over the country, is under tremendous economic pressure, mainly because:

- most are small businesses, and therefore lack the resources and capital needed to recognize and implement technological advances and lean manufacturing processes,
- and a variety of factors such as cheaper labor and health-care costs have sent many manufacturing jobs overseas.

A call to the Forest Products Industry "Dream Team"

According to FPL researcher Bob Ross, keeping these businesses competitive and open is important both to local economies, and the overall health of our forests. "To properly manage our forests, to maintain a proper balance of mature and young trees, we need markets for the timber that needs to be removed from our forests. The health of our forests really relies on our ability to keep businesses like these running. What we strive for is a situation where jobs are maintained, rural economies remain strong, and forest health is protected."

One of the ways FPL is doing that in the Midwest is through a partnership with the University of Minnesota Duluth's Natural Resources Research Institute (NRRI). NRRI's approach is to pull diverse subject matter experts from various sources such as FPL to create a team aimed at helping small businesses improve their bottom line to stay competitive.

Brian Brashaw, NRRI project leader, says "unlike typical consultants who usually come in, inspect a business from the outside, and then offer recommendations without really engaging the company, we truly work hand in hand with them. We make it a point to start with team members from the business we are trying to help. Usually these are folks who are doing ground level work, have some ideas about how to improve the process, but really have no way of getting their ideas to upper-level management where change can occur. Our process gives them that venue. We also support their ideas with needed technical and engineering expertise."

Brashaw adds that this unique approach helps the team to get buy-in from the company, and thus get their recommendations implemented. He says many times businesses become so entrenched in their operations that they continue to do things "...just because we've done them that way for 20 years. It sometimes takes someone from the outside to ask the right 'why' questions."

Two areas the team typically focuses on are improving the product and improving the process or manufacturing system. The goal is to improve efficiency and eliminate waste.

Says Ross, “We applied many facets of our FPL research program to the flooring system. We improved the connectors that hold the floor together. We looked at the substrate and structure, which is usually plywood or oriented strand board, products that got their genesis at the Forest Products Lab. We looked at finishing and drying schedules. We even looked at moisture absorption and vibration characteristics. In the end, working as a team we were able to help Horner come up with an improved product that was easier to manufacture.”

Ross says that any forestry-based business interested in getting some help should check out NRRI and the Forest Products Laboratory at www.fpl.fs.fed.us, or by calling FPL at 608-231-9200.

Ross also says that getting to work on a project like this was a thrill he won't soon forget. “You know, you watch some of these games being played, and you think, wow, I had a hand in that. It's a good feeling. And I also realize this was probably the only way a middle-aged guy like me was ever going to get on the same basketball floor as Shaq.”

The USDA Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory was established in 1910 in Madison, Wis., with the mission to conserve and extend the country's wood resources. Today, FPL's research scientists work with academic and industrial researchers and other government agencies in exploring ways to promote healthy forests and clean water, and improve papermaking and recycling processes. Information is available at FPL's Web site: www.fpl.fs.fed.us. Through FPL's Advanced Housing Research Center, (www.fpl.fs.fed.us/ahrc/), researchers also work to improve homebuilding technologies and materials.

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