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Experts Use Internet to Train New Orleans Inspectors to Evaluate Flood Damage to Wooden Homes

MADISON, Wis.— Hurricane cleanup is underway in New Orleans, but with so much damage by flood waters, thousands of homes and other buildings need to be inspected to answer the question: repair or demolish? Without physically going there, researchers from the Forest Products Laboratory (FPL) in Madison and the University of Minnesota Duluth Natural Resources Research Institute (NRRI) will be able to show New Orleans' inspectors how to find possible hidden damage in homes and buildings.

USDA's Bob Ross in Madison and UMD-NRRI's Brian Brashaw in Duluth teamed up to present an online, interactive seminar to New Orleans director of safety and permits, Mike Centineo, and his staff on Tuesday morning, November 22. The presentation, conducted by Internet and telephone, covered several techniques for detecting deteriorated wood that don't require cutting into the structure, as well as case studies relevant to the problems in the city.

"We've been studying nondestructive ways to evaluate wood rot for years," said Brashaw. "We've taught these techniques to engineers and bridge inspectors, to historic home preservationists and to forest managers. The class on Tuesday was one of our most important. We really want to help the people of New Orleans."

Centineo knew he needed help and contacted the FPL and Bob Ross, who pulled together some recommendations for post-Katrina New Orleans. Ross is quick to add, however, that New Orleans likely has special circumstances that neither he nor Brashaw know about. Centineo and his staff will have to take the information and adapt it to their situation.

The two-hour Web seminar was based on the book "Wood and Timber Condition Assessment Manual" written by Ross and Brashaw, along with Xiping Wang (NRRI), Robert White (FPL) and Roy Pellerin (Washington State University). Among other things, the online course showed the New Orleans participants different ways to assess water-damaged wood. Brashaw and Ross also explained how to use special ultrasound or impact-induced stress wave tools that detect wood decay.

"From our respective locations in Duluth and Madison, we were able to conduct a short course using a combination of PowerPoint presentation software and video demonstrations of equipment," said Ross. "We were also able to show participants several locations on the Internet that contain reams of information for their reconstruction projects."

This project is possible because of a grant, funded by Northern Initiatives and the USDA Forest Service Wood Education and Resource Center, to develop a "Community of Practice" on the Internet for inspection of historic wood structures. This Web-based community is hosted by Bemidji State University's Northern Tier High Technology Corridor. It is a gathering place for anyone to seek information on the topic.

The mission of UMD's Natural Resources Research Institute is to foster the economic development of Minnesota's natural resources in an environmentally sound manner to promote private sector employment.

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, researchers also work to improve homebuilding technologies and materials.

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