



## Common purpose

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By **Jameson French**

### In his Wood Futures perspective, Jameson French of US-based Northland Forest Products urges closer ties between the timber sector and environmentalists – and zero tolerance of illegal logging

A highlight of 2007 for me was hearing Alexander von Bismark, US executive director of the [Environmental Investigation Agency](#) (EIA), speaking at Chatham House in London about industry groups' and environmental NGOs' joint efforts to combat illegal logging. He not only thanked the US Hardwood Federation for its support for legislation to tackle the illegal trade, but also applauded the "legal and sustainable" US hardwood resource.

For several years, both the industry and the environmental community have been struggling to find some realistic means to come up with a measure that has real teeth and might actually reduce the flow of illegally logged timber. The Lacey Act, which was introduced nearly 100 years ago to combat the importation of wildlife products, proved to be the ideal vehicle. Instead of creating a complex new bureaucratic system for imports from high risk areas, the Act has been amended to cover timber, creating a 'big stick' that discourages taking the risk of dealing with products that could be from illegal sources. In other words, if you get caught knowingly importing illegal products, the penalties are severe.

Having spent most of my adult life trying to promote the joint interests of the timber trade and the environmental community, von Bismark's words were music to my ears. As vice-chair of the Washington, DC-based Hardwood Federation, I was aware of the struggle we had to hold together broad industry support as we lobbied for the Lacey Act amendments. Many were terrified at the thought of supporting environmental NGO-sponsored legislation, let alone more regulation of our sector.

#### **Building trust**

Luckily the cooler heads prevailed. The strategic and business-like approach of the EIA-led coalition of NGOs slowly built trust and the feeling that we could forge a partnership. Wow! These guys actually did what they said they would and stuck with their positions! And the honest dialogue and political capital we built have the potential to expand into other areas of mutual interest. Amending the Lacey Act has also provided the perfect vehicle for compromise between the various parties.

But there's still more to be done. We all know wood is the environmental building material. So why are we so bad at communicating this message in a clear, unified manner? Step one is zero tolerance of "bad eggs" in the trade, whether they be suspicious manufacturers in a certain region, or more local unsustainable logging operations. The timber industry in the G8 countries has to unite and insist that national and local governments stop unsustainable practices and the flow of illegally-sourced wood. Instead of waiting for environmental NGOs to expose the worst players in our trade, let's be more diligent in self-policing. Imagine the power of an industry-led exposé of a supplier of

illegal timber for a manufactured product, or American and European trade associations urging members to boycott a particular product, or even a country unwilling to enforce its own laws?

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Of course, we would have to handle such actions with care. However, serious discussion on this subject might go a long way to help clean up the acts of suppliers eager for a share of the European or North American trade.

### **Starting point**

Once we can prove our intent by actively supporting necessary legislative action, we can start to challenge the environmental community to join us in promoting both solid wood and other manufactured products. We must start with promotion of locally-produced materials (watch that carbon footprint!), but we can expand that to include comparisons with steel, PVCu and concrete. The US industry has already taken a proactive role, with the [AHEC](#)-sponsored Seneca Creek study on legality and sustainability of the US hardwood forest. We should also continue to support and encourage independent third-party environmental certification. And we need to take bold steps to resist that cheap offer from the “not sure about it” source. Let’s be comfortable about paying a little more for a product we know is legal and sustainable.

2008 may be the year that the stars are in alignment for an environmental-based promotion of timber. Climate change is on everyone’s mind. Just look to Australia to see the political impact of this issue. The US will soon have a new president too and most of the leading candidates have very different views from the current administration on energy and environmental issues. The [EU](#)’s leadership was clearly defined at the recent UN Climate Change Conference.

Healthy sustainable forests and solid wood products are important players in the carbon sequestration debate. Consumers want energy-efficient, durable, sustainable and healthy products. So let’s work together as an international trade to cultivate new relationships with the environmental community and work with them to promote the sustainable raw material – wood.

### **About the author**

Jameson French is president of New Hampshire and Virginia-based Northland Forest Products Inc. His family has been in the hardwood trade since the 1880s. He is past chairman of the American Hardwood Export Council and the Hardwood Manufacturer’s Association and currently vice-chair of the Hardwood Federation. He is also a past chair of the oldest environmental organisation in New Hampshire, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and is on the president’s council of the National Wildlife Federation.

New Hampshire’s governor recently appointed him to the Climate Change Action Plan Task Force for the state.

Mr French also has UK roots. He worked in Liverpool in the agency business in the 1970s and attended the University of Edinburgh.