



Wtca Update

Study Reveals Increased Level of Automation among Truss & Wall Panel Manufacturers

by WTCA Staff

An initial study indicates that the trend toward automation has already taken hold in the structural building components industry.

In a recent assessment of the U.S. modular home industry, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory observed that automation and advanced technology were largely absent from modular home factories. Although taking place in a controlled factory environment, much of the construction process resembled that of traditional on-site stick built house construction.

Background

The Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with North Carolina State University, assessed home manufacturing technology, offering the following insights:

- The major process stations in a modular home factory that use wood based materials are floor framing, floor decking, wall framing, wall sheathing, wall set, roof framing, roof assembly, roof decking, and roof setting.
- The typical U.S. modular housing factory has very little advanced technology. Examples of base technologies found to be in use include manual pneumatic nail guns, manual cut-off saws, cranes, and roller track systems. Opportunities to implement advanced technology potentially abound.
- Factories that manufacture roof trusses or wall panels have generally implemented a higher level of technology. Many modular home manufacturers purchase roof trusses, but we did not find that same trend for wall panels.

Objectives & Approach

Following the assessment, the group plans to examine barriers that prevent modular manufacturers from incorporating advanced technologies by developing a series of surveys—one for wall panel equipment manufacturers and one for wall panel manufacturers. Automated wall panel systems will be used for benchmarking because they offer an appropriate fit into the modular home factory. They offer a range of capacity and technology level. It is expected that the modular home industry will likely consider such systems in the next three to five years as pressure increases toward more effective workforce utilization.

at a glance

- ❑ The first phase of a new study conducted by U. S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory and North Carolina State University revealed that wall panel manufacturers employ a higher degree of manufacturing technology than do modular home manufacturers.
- ❑ Phase 2 of the study will include time studies of wall panel manufacturing facilities.
- ❑ Wall panel manufacturers and equipment suppliers will complete a survey about technology in the industry to reveal the barriers the modular homebuilding industry has in introducing advanced technologies into their operations.

Wall panel equipment manufacturers and wall panel manufacturers will be asked in the surveys to describe the capabilities and application of equipment they supply. They group will be asked to identify purchasers or users of their equipment and those that use the equipment effectively. Wall panel manufacturers will be surveyed regarding their use of wall panel systems equipment. Tests such as time studies will be conducted with a sampling of wall panel manufacturers using automated or semi-automated equipment to better understand and confirm capabilities and limitations of manufacturing systems. Final reports will describe information from the surveys and studies, and attempt to classify wall panel equipment systems according to technology level. The study will conclude in December 2006.

Information reported on wall panel equipment assessments from this study will be of interest to the wall panel industry. Reports will be summarized, published in trade journals and presented at an annual Forest Products Society meeting. **SBC**

For more information about this study, contact Dr. Phil Mitchell (phil_mitchell@ncsu.edu), North Carolina State University Department of Wood and Paper Science.

SBC Readers Most Interested in Design & Engineering Topics

SBC readers have spoken. According to 50 component manufacturers that completed an online survey in 2005, design and engineering advancements ranked as most important out of a list of 75 different component industry topics. Here is a list of the other issues that rounded out the top ten:

1. Design and engineering advancements
2. Customer service
3. Design responsibilities
4. Quality control
5. Educational programs for builders or framers
6. Finding/training/retaining truss technicians
6. Profitability/margins
7. Education for architects/engineers
7. Building code issues
7. Lumber quality

Among issues of least interest were the producer price index, fall protection, insulation requirements and cement supply/price.

Results from this survey will be used to determine future editorial content. A special thanks to all who participated! **SBC**

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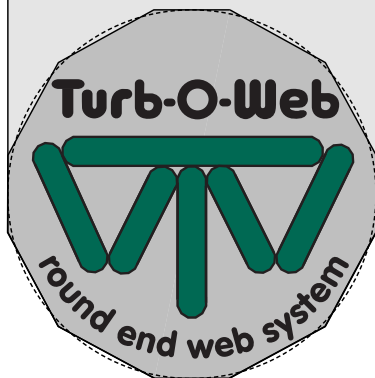
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