



LATELY, BARELY MORE THAN A DAY GOES BY WHEN I DON'T READ AN ARTICLE ABOUT THE PROS AND CONS OF DRINKING MILK. "More and more evidence is surfacing, however, that milk consumption may not only be unhelpful, it might also be detrimental," states a *New York Times* article by Aaron E. Carroll, a professor of pediatrics at Indiana University School of Medicine. "This is in spite of the fact that the United States Department of Agriculture and other organizations advocate that even adults should drink at least three cups a day."

Dairy Management, which is funded by government-mandated taxes on milk producers, spends \$140 million annually to promote milk and cheese, and the Department of Agriculture (with taxpayer dollars) funds additional activities. And milk isn't the only thing pushed by the Department of Agriculture through these mandatory levies, which drive up consumer prices while aiding one product at the expense of another. Cotton, pork, beef, almonds, peanut butter and even mushrooms all have commodity checkoff programs. (Be sure that you're eating your daily recommended portion of mushrooms!)

The latest addition to the list of commodity programs may surprise you, though. The wood industry now has a program, supported by the Department of Agriculture, that funnels dollars into promoting the idea of high-rise wood construction. And not only is this program providing promotional dollars, but the Department of Agriculture is also directly funding competitions and questionable research to encourage wood use.

The big gun in its promotion of wood is a study (commissioned by the wood industry) by SOM that discusses the theoretical possibility of building a high-rise wood building. The wood industry widely cites this study as evidence that designers should be considering wood for the structural systems of tall buildings. Unfortunately, they neglect to include the study's conclusions that while great engineers can probably design a high-rise building from wood, the following items, as stated in the report, need to also be considered:

- ▶ Timber is not the ideal material for resisting large loads at critically stressed members.
- ▶ The lightweight nature of wood makes net uplift a primary concern.
- ▶ Differential vertical shortening between columns and walls due to

elastic strain and creep is a significant design issue.

- ▶ Potential moisture sources from bathrooms, kitchens and exterior walls may result in mold, mildew and rot.
- ▶ Tested (fire protection) systems for the proposed assemblies do not, to our knowledge, exist.

The effort is so misguided that it even made this year's Wastebook (issued annually by Senator Tom Coburn from Oklahoma), which derided the more than \$2 million the Department of Agriculture spent on a competition to promote cross-laminated wood construction—especially since there's only one U.S. manufacturer and most of the product comes from Europe, according to the Inhabitat architectural media website. So much for "local" materials.

And don't even get me started on the myth about wood's green advantages. The wood industry touts the use of wood from sustainably managed forests, but these only include about 7% of all forests. And almost always, the impacts of decomposition or incineration at the time of building demolition are ignored, as are waste and the use of adhesives in the manufacture of wood products such as cross-laminated timber (glulam). Trees are green; glulam is not.

Perhaps another *New York Times* article, this one on the Department of Agriculture's misguided efforts, summed it up best when it said it's not surprising that "convincing developers and builders to switch to wood will be a hard sell." And given the questionable benefits and harm it would do to other sectors of the economy, the bigger question is why we're wasting money on the effort at all.


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