

Floor Covering Media

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Sustainable Lumber Company is an innovator



Rob Chaney of the Missoulian recently introduced his readers to [noble rot](#). During winemaking, the moldy grapes produce some of the priciest of juices.



Winemakers are not the only beneficiaries of [noble rot](#). Ryan Palma of [Sustainable Lumber Company](#) has found a bounty in Montana's beetle-killed, fungus-stained pine forests. Picking at a friable seam of rotten heartwood in a Ponderosa pine plank reveals a defect that is what actually makes the lumber a sought after raw material; for the production consumer goods like a high-end, living room table. Consumers place value on such finished goods; made with aged woods, which rot, split, check and crack, that add to texture.



[Sustainable Lumber Company](#) demands beetle-killed pine, especially with exotic blue hues. Palma's Missoula

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showroom offers pine and fir flooring panels in eight shades on three surfaces, from smooth to hand-gouged. While those tree species are known as “softwood,” the dings, dents and scratches, which occurs either naturally or by Palma’s preparation process, make it more desirable than “hardwood” species like beech or aspen. “The industry’s changed a lot in the last 20 years,” said Palma, who was the University of Montana Grizzly football free safety, during the 1995 national championship team. “I used to sell boxcars of lumber to distributors, who sold it to retailers, who sold it to builders. Now I’m the largest producer of fir flooring in the world, and it’s a 100 percent made-in-Montana product.”



Palma’s six-year-old company employs just one or two loggers who cut trees on order and send them to a Mennonite community for the hand-finishing work. About 40 people there hand-surface, dye and shape the wood into flooring and paneling. Sustainable Lumber also makes surfaces for cabinets and other custom fittings, but limits that work to local customers. Palma said 90 percent of his inventory ships out of state.

Missoulian



Last Wednesday, he loaded seven pallets of finished fir into a Fed Ex truck for delivery to an internet start-up company in Brooklyn, New York. “A lot of the lumber industry is a dinosaur, not willing to change,” Palma said. “We’re doing things nobody in the lumber industry was doing. I’m building a 3-D showroom on the website so

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people can virtually walk through and see everything we have. It builds validity that we're a real company, not some internet broker."



Innovative wood products have made a significant dent in the traditional lumber market pie chart. On Nov. 14, [Alaska Airlines](#) flew a passenger jet from Seattle to Washington, D.C. on a tank of 20 percent biofuel made from wood pulp. An Oregon company produces sheets 12 feet wide, 48 feet long and 2 feet thick. They compete with concrete slabs for skyscraper construction, with the potential to support commercial buildings six to 10 stories tall.



About [SLC](#)

But while Palma may need a single beetle-killed Ponderosa pine for a custom table order, he said he depends on Montana's existing 10 large sawmills for the hundreds of thousands of board-feet of Douglas fir he uses for flooring. "We're trying to use technology where nobody else in the industry really is right now," Palma said. "But we still need that mill infrastructure to stay in place, not only for us but for the overall health of the forest."

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Flooring Updates

By Betty

Flooring Network

For those in the market and those that serve it

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