

Each month TimberTrader News' editor Helen Hatty will take a look at one aspect of the Chain of Custody topic.

Green Building Council of Australia

There are a number of organisations dedicated to improving the way we construct our homes, offices and commercial premises in a more environmentally friendly way. Timber is a key part of that scenario.

I spoke with Robin Mellon, Green Star executive director with the Green Building Council of Australia (GBCA) about his company's involvement in that picture, particularly focusing on how the GBCA regards timber in construction.

The GBCA was started in 2002 with seed funding from the NSW and Victorian governments. Today it is an independent non-government organisation (NGO).

Its key objectives are to "drive the transition of the Australian property industry towards sustainability by promoting green building programs, technologies, design practices and operations, as well as the integration of green building initiatives into mainstream design, construction and operation of buildings".

Robin said, "We produced our first rating tool to assess the environmental credentials of buildings back in 2003, looking at the office market."

The GBCA employs more than 40 people around the country, with offices in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth.

It has over 815 members across the industry.

"We try to provide four main things," Robin continued. "The first is the ability for a project manager to be able to certify a building; second is providing some means of education about Green Star and the work of the GBCA.

"We also talk to a lot of local, state and federal governments about what incentives can be provided to work towards best practice; and lastly we encourage innovation in terms of new technology, strategies and new ways of doing things."

He added, "The use and application of our tools is voluntary. They are all freely available on our website for download and at the very least will provide people with a checklist of things to look at if you're trying to either 'green' an existing building, or build a new sustainable building.

"Within each rating tool is a list of 70-75

different credits, which is how you can accrue points based on the environmental attributes of each of those areas.

"You can build up credits in a number of ways. You can go for credits that may be easier to obtain or cheaper to document, or you can for all of the credits if you want to go for a very high score.

"The materials category looks not only at what the building is made from, it also looks at where those materials may go on to, where the building itself can be recycled."

Robin stated that Green Star does not look at operational performance of a building as that can change, depending on the circumstances under which it is used.

"In a way we're aiming for the top 25 per cent of the market. The ratings that are available are Four Star, which is Best Practice, Five Star, which is Australian Excellence, and Six Star, which is World Leader.

We asked if Robin felt there are misconceptions about the role of the GBCA, to which he replied to the affirmative.

"We need to make sure people in the building materials industry understand the role of Green Star in encouraging best practice rather than forcing people into different benchmarks.

"There are a number of organisations which set down standards for compliance and regulation but there's also a call for tools that go above and beyond that."

We then sought the GBCA's stance on the use of timber in residential construction, with Robin stating that it is difficult to isolate timber alone from their tools.

"Timber represents two points (achievable through one credit) in the 'Materials' category within the tools, as does steel.

"The timber credit within Green Star has been there to traditionally try and minimise the impact of the use of timber within a development and has historically rewarded timber that is certified by FSC, because, in the past, they were seen as representing best practice.

"We are moving away from that position and moving more towards what sustainably produced timber looks like, where it can be applied, etc.

"What we're trying to do is edge towards a position where timber certified by any scheme which meets a number of best practice criteria, can be encouraged.

"We do see timber as a sustainable building material," he emphasised. "We want to encourage its use in buildings and its part of a larger scale picture about life cycle analysis (LCA), so that we can look at that with a long term, life cycle approach.

"We'll continue to have that reward for timber within Green Star and need to encourage best practice without discouraging different parts of the green building supply chain.

"We also recognise that in the past we haven't spoken to the timber industry as a whole, although we have engaged with different organisations around the industry, and the feedback we've received since we released those 15 criteria within the assessment framework a couple of months ago has been considerable.

"That is very valuable - we've learnt a lot from that feedback and there are changes that we will need to make.

"We would love to receive feedback from anyone in the timber industry on how they'd like to see Green Star evolve.

"We also need to hear about their encounters and how they see it affecting the market because that enables us to make better decisions, as well as understand the difference between tension of the environmental impact and the impact itself.

"Looking into the future, we need to get a very clear understanding, not only for us but also for our members and the timber industry, as to where we sit in terms of the difference between regulation and compliance, and best practice.

"We want to work more closely with the timber producers and the traders, making sure that we understand the implications of what we're doing; making sure we stay abreast of that and ensuring we encourage the Australian timber market.

"We also need to be able to accurately determine the use of a product in a certain application and what the alternatives are; and we need to be able to ensure people can make decisions based on accurate information," he concluded.