

Pinning down the elusive concept of sustainability

Sustainability is the buzzword here at Furntech-AFRDI at the moment, not least because we have now spent just on three years researching and writing a Standard on Sustainability, which we are about to launch.

During this time, the question of sustainability as a concept to be embraced by industry has progressed from the 'worthy, but do we really need to know about it' category to being 'absolutely necessary'. The manufacturing world has had to change its attitude to sustainability: consumers are demanding evidence of a commitment to sustainability, governments are mandating it when they call for tenders (see last page). Reinforcing the trend, a national furniture franchise is now demanding evidence of sustainable manufacture as part of a suite of requirements to support quality assurance.

Sustainability attracts many definitions, the classic one dating back 22 years: meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs[#]. Sustainability, in the broadest sense, is the ability to sustain a certain process or state at a certain rate or level, hence the term **sustain-ability**. In our field, the concept of sustainability may be narrowed down to developing technologies to transform materials with reduced emission of greenhouse gases, reduced use of non-renewable or toxic materials, and reduced generation of waste.

We need to examine issues such as:

- the possibility of eliminating some 'elite' materials, and promoting use of those which are more abundant
- ensuring that mixed or composite materials can be separated
- that products are of a modular design, meaning they can be updated through replacement of modules only
- and that products are designed for easy disassembly as an aid to recycling

This leads on to the question of life cycle assessment (LCA). The Massachusetts Institute of Technology sees LCA as '...an objective process to evaluate the environmental burdens associated with a product, process, or activity by identifying and quantifying energy and materials usage and environmental releases, to assess the impact of those... and to evaluate and implement opportunities to effect environmental improvements...'. Furntech-AFRDI already contributes in its own way to LCA via its testing and certification regimes.

Sustainability is not an isolated subject – in the words of a recent European conference tasked with examining the question, it is 'all about connections. For example:

- we cannot talk about environmental sustainability without considering energy
- we cannot reform energy without looking at transport and industry
- we cannot make changes to transport and industry without considering the effects on jobs and growth

If the issues and challenges for sustainability are interconnected, our response must be too. We can no longer pretend that it is more important which institution, which discipline, which sector, or even which country finds solutions. Research is internationalised and so must be its answers.*

Furntech-AFRDI's Sustainability Standard is mindful of the breadth of the sustainability topic, and therefore also addresses issues such as ethical sourcing of raw materials and labour, and the carbon footprint generated during all phases of manufacturing, including transport of raw materials, components, and finished articles.

Realistically, it will by necessity be something of a work in progress as our understanding of these complex issues becomes more sophisticated. Importantly, it serves as a turning point towards helping us all to make more responsible use of resources. Practically, together with our existing Blue Tick and Orange Tick certifications and 146 Standard for Leather, the Sustainability Standard and its accompanying certification mark will become part of a powerful suite of tools which will bring benefits to both manufacturers - through market differentiation - and to consumers.

Brundtland Commission 1987

**Janez Potočnik, European Commissioner for Science and Research, Leipzig Sustainability Conference 2007*

Even a chair has its own identity – and this can translate into a commercial advantage

At Furntech-AFRDI, a very important part of the operation is the work done by our testing officers, who make sure that a wide range of furnishings – but most often office chairs – meet certification standards by applying a rigorous battery of performance and load tests.

Their work however is often hampered by a failure by many manufacturers and distributors to meet some simple requirements which together establish the identity of the item under test. As the test results are specific to a particular chair, it follows that to accurately establish the chair's identity is commercially important in a field where many chairs may appear to be similar.

Chairs should be supplied with the following information (under the general heading of instructions for use):

- Instructions on use of the adjusting mechanisms
- Instructions on upkeep and maintenance
- An outline on ergonomic seat backs and height settings
- The manufacturer or importer's name and address
- A statement on care, flammability, and a summary of operating details and ergonomic instructions.

In the interests of improving consistency in the presentation of ergonomic instructions, we are considering whether it is appropriate to continue to accept these instructions affixed to the underside of a seat. Placing ergonomic instructions in locations where they cannot be read while seated seems to us to be in conflict with the intent of the Standard. We plan to confirm our position over the coming weeks, and will communicate relevant details to those affected as soon as possible.

Under the heading of marking, all chairs must be permanently marked with:

- The manufacturer or importer's name and address
- The year of manufacture
- A label stating: 'Hard-tyred castors are unsuitable for use on hard floors or firm chairmats, in which case soft-tyred castors should be used. Soft-tyred castors are distinguishable by the tyre being a different colour to the body of the castor'

In addition, Furntech-AFRDI requires that the information sheet and checklist is completed and signed. It is, in effect, a formal declaration identifying the various components in chairs for testing.

We are not being pedantic in asking for this information. All we are seeking to do is to establish the unique identity of a chair type, so that the resulting test information - and the commercial advantage this confers - pertains to that chair only. If all the relevant information about a chair's identity is supplied along with the chair, it means that we can offer a faster turn-round – and that's a benefit for everybody.

Bunk beds recalled under ACCC order

Bed retail chains Sleep City Holdings Limited and Fantastic Furniture Pty Ltd have recalled bunk beds that failed to meet the required safety standard.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has accepted separate court enforceable undertakings from Sleep City and Fantastic Furniture after the companies supplied bunk beds that did not comply with the mandatory product safety standard.

"Retailers are responsible for ensuring that the bunk beds they sell fully comply with the mandatory standard," according to ACCC Deputy Chair, Mr Peter Kell.

"Products in breach of the standard may cause serious injuries to small children.

"The ACCC will continue to be vigilant in its product safety surveying to ensure compliance with the mandatory safety standards," Mr Kell said.

The ACCC found that Sleep City sold 'Jessie' and 'London' bunk beds which had openings in the upper bunk guard rails that posed a potential fall-out hazard for a child, and did not display required warning labeling. The company also sold 'Trio' bunk beds which were found to have gaps in the frame that may have presented a serious head or limb entrapment hazard for children. Sleep City has undertaken to contact all customers who have bought these models to either modify the bunk beds free of charge or refund customers in full.

Fantastic Furniture sold the 'Mikki high sleeper' bunk bed that was found to have wider openings in the guard rail than were permitted, gaps in the guard rail and the mattress base that may entrap limbs, and warning labeling not displayed as required.

Fantastic Furniture will provide a full refund to all customers who bought this product.

Both Sleep City and Fantastic Furniture acknowledged engaging in conduct that contravened section 65C of the Trade Practices Act by selling the non-compliant bunk beds, and provided undertakings to:

- ensure that goods supplied comply with the required safety or information standards
- publish information notices on their respective websites
- display an information notice in all of their respective Australian stores
- establish and maintain a trade practices law compliance program.

MORE CONCERNS – SEE PAGE 4

The Infant & Nursery Products Association of Australia (INPAA) also is expressing concern over sleep products.

The association's focus of concern is on products that may restrict movement within a cot, and could result in a child being trapped.

The consumer organisation Choice recently tested 10 cots, and found two to be non-compliant.

In the United States, there is a new Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act. A critical element of the act is that suppliers to the US market for certain children's products must have third party testing from accredited laboratories. The implications for Australia are that a system of mandatory reporting is expected to be introduced next year.

You can fool some of the people...

British furniture store DFS has been ordered to scrap a series of television ads after it used a production technique to exaggerate the size of its sofas.

The ads showed people dancing, miming and playing air guitar to the Nickelback song Rockstar in front of a range of sofas.

DFS admitted it filmed the actors against a "green screen" and later superimposed them into the ad after 21 viewers complained that the sofas appeared bigger than they actually were.

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) upheld the complaints, finding the furniture was out of scale with the people and therefore misleading about the size of the sofas on offer.



Crackdown on non-compliant timber products

Three national bodies reliant on timber products that meet Australian standards have joined forces against Asia's multi-billion dollar export trade in wood materials considered by some to be flawed.

The Engineered Wood Products Association (EWPPA), the Wood Panels Association and the Furniture Industry Association (FIAA) have said 'enough' after latest industry testing on Chinese furniture components revealed formaldehyde emissions were up to three times higher than the equivalent Australian made product.

Action by the three industry sectors to expose imported products that are dangerously below certification standards for health, safety and structural use has the support of two powerful consumer watchdogs – the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union.

The failed Chinese products include fibreboard and particleboard shelving. Plywood products are also under suspicion of not meeting AS/NZS 4266.

The industry associations are lobbying the federal ministers over the issue of importing products that do not meet Australian health and safety standards. They are seeking mandatory compliance with Australian standards for structural use and formaldehyde limits for plywood, MDF and particleboard.

from SUPPLIER magazine

Furntech-AFRDI introduces rated loads for chairs

More plentiful nutrition coupled with increasingly sedentary lifestyles means that as a race, we humans are getting more than a little bit bigger and heavier.

It's a trend that has not escaped the attention of Furntech-AFRDI clients, who have been asking for the company to introduce rated loads for chairs as a supplement to existing certification.

Furntech-AFRDI technical manager Ian Burton has been working on a strategy to 'top-up' chairs from existing certifications, so that a client can specify what load rating is required.

"People are simply wanting a load rating so they can be confident they are covered for a given population of users," Ian explains. "The mean mass of the population has probably moved a little and the standard deviation rather more from that which existed when the current standards were published.

"In effect, some people are asking for the establishment of higher ratings, and that is justifiable."

But at the same time, Ian Burton points out that an existing AFRDI Level 6 certified office chair will meet most commercial needs. Level 6 especially signifies that a chair should be able to withstand extremely severe conditions of use such as police stations, military installations, control rooms and use in heavy industry. Level 4 and Level 5 meet most normal office and commercial needs.

"In our current process aimed at introducing rated loads for chairs," Ian Burton adds, "we are extending our ratings right out to catering for people weighing up to 200kg. But these are extremes, falling well outside the mainstream."

Furntech-AFRDI will continue to test commercial seating and maintain the existing levels of certification, because they indicate useful points on the cost/value/performance curve. People must realistically assess their commercial needs, and choose chairs accordingly.

"To specify beyond what is actually required could be a case of over-kill," Ian Burton adds, "and often is not justifiable for a normal population of users."

How 'Australian' are some Australian-made goods? ACCC ruling may prompt fresh assessment of other industries

Creswick Woollen Mills Pty Ltd has admitted making false Australian Made claims for its premium merino wool blankets for the past three years, following an ACCC investigation. The blanket material was spun and woven in China, with only the cutting and sewing done in Australia.

Creswick Woollen Mills, based near Ballarat in Victoria, has acknowledged the ACCC's view that substantial transformation of its merino wool blankets did not take place in Australia and that it has contravened sections 52, 53(c), 53(eb) and 55 of the *Trade Practices Act 1974*.*

Under the Act, goods can only be represented as being of Australian origin if they have been substantially transformed in Australia, and at least 50 per cent of the costs of manufacturing the goods have been incurred in Australia.

"Creswick's claim that its merino wool blankets were Australian Made falsely conveyed to consumers that the blankets were substantially transformed in Australia," ACCC Chairman, Mr Graeme Samuel said.

"This false impression given by Creswick to consumers was reinforced by Creswick's improper usage of the *Australian Made* logo on the packaging of its blankets. It is important that consumer confidence in the integrity of the well-known *Australian Made* logo is maintained.

"Many consumers buy particular brands specifically because they want Australian made goods and are entitled to expect that claims made by a business that its goods are Australian made are correct and truthful," Mr Samuel said.

Possible implications for the Australian furniture industry arising from ACCC ruling

Already, these columns have reported the re-opening of some mothballed US furniture manufacturing plants as industry faces the reckonings imposed by carbon footprint legislation, and the need to take account of the true cost of freighting components half-way round the world.

While Australia clearly lacks the scale of markets in the US, it might be reasonable to hope that manufacturing here becomes a little more local again as manufacturers strive to meet sustainability targets and consumer demands for green products.

Saving money by going back to square one

In tight economic times, it can pay to revisit some business fundamentals which can all too easily be lost sight of in the daily grind of maintaining production against a background of shrinking opportunities.

One area worthy of constant assessment is waste in all its forms. At the end of the day, customers will only pay for value – they are not willing to support you for any work you do (maybe due to inefficient practices) that does not add value to the product.

Consider the principles of Japan's Just In Time (JIT) program, which identifies seven types of waste:

Overproduction: producing more, sooner and faster than required by the next process

Excess transportation: any transport that adds cost but no value to the product

Excess inventory: this is not only a waste in itself, but also creates waste

Excess processing: doing more work than necessary

Waiting: operator or machine idle time

Correction: repairs to products

Motion: walking or wasted motion to pick up or store parts

To these 'classic' JIT definitions might be added the tendency to use excessive or wasteful packaging for goods delivery, coupled with an inability to consolidate truck loads for maximum efficiency.

Individually, these factors don't amount to much – collectively, they can be the difference between thriving or not surviving.

LATEST SAFETY NEWS

US manufacturers of drop-side cribs are reported to be considering voluntarily ceasing making them.

Such cribs allow parents to raise and lower one side for easy access, but bad designs, missing pieces and worn-out hardware have caused the adjustable railings to separate from cribs in ways that parents often could not see. The result – babies slid through the resulting gaps, and in some cases their heads got caught and they strangled.

Bunk beds recalled on ACCC order

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has obtained interlocutory orders against Aziz Properties and Services Pty Ltd and its sole officeholder, Dr Rodney Aziz.

The ACCC's proceeding concerns the alleged supply by the company of bunk beds that do not comply with the mandatory consumer product safety standard for bunk beds AS/NZS 4220:1994.

The ACCC claims the beds' non-compliance with the mandatory standard may pose a serious safety hazard to users. In particular, the ACCC is concerned that the potential risks of the beds' alleged failure to comply with the standard may present fall-through and entrapment hazards.

The beds of concern were supplied from the company's showroom in Mitcham, Victoria under the trading name, Infinity Megastore, and also over the internet, including from an eBay site. The beds are described as a Model 276-Single Bunk Bed and a Model 277-Double Bunk Bed.

Justice Finkelstein made orders restraining the company and Dr Aziz from supplying bunk beds which do not comply with certain specified provisions of the mandatory standard. Justice Finkelstein also ordered the company to implement a product recall program in relation to the bunk beds already supplied.

A new term with far-reaching implications for manufacturing industry

In a world where acronyms become ever more common, there's a new one to consider – CSR, Corporate Social Responsibility.

CSR touches on a number of areas, including sustainable development, and the ethical conduct of business (including sourcing of materials and fair use of labour). It is a concept through which companies are called on to consider the interests of society by taking responsibility for the impact of their activities on customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders, communities and other stakeholders. The CSR concept also encourages companies to consider the environment.

Increasingly, CSR is being seen as an obligation that extends beyond simple legal compliance, and seeks from companies voluntary contributions to improve the quality of life for employees and for society at large.

If all of this seems a one-way ticket to spending with no return in sight, consider a statement by the leading UK furnishing testing organisation FIRA in its annual report: **'Benefits [of CSR] include improved reputation, higher profits, more effective recruitment and retention of employees. There are also marketing benefits, as CSR can provide unique selling points in a crowded market place.'**

Here at Furntech-AFRDI we are considering many of the aspects embodied in CSR as part of our preparation of the forthcoming AFRDI Sustainability Standard. Internationally, in 2010, the International Standards Organisation is due to publish ISO 26000, a new standard on social responsibility, which seeks to steer a middle course between strict legislation and regulation compared with relative freedom.

China recognises DMF problem

The Chinese Leather Industry Association (CLIA), representing 1300 manufacturers, has officially recognised health problems – mainly skin irritation – caused by dimethyl fumarate (DMF) included as an anti-mould agent in the export packaging of some leather couches and sofas.

In an industry journal dated February 9th, CLIA has acknowledged a ban imposed by the European Commission Product Safety Committee on importation of leather goods containing DMF, and warned members to comply.

While inclusion of DMF in Chinese goods bound for Europe caused considerable concern last year, and an outbreak of compensation claims, it is believed that the substance is not routinely used on Chinese shipments to Australia, because of the shorter distances involved.

Lower lead levels mandated

New United States consumer product safety legislation lowers the amount of lead permissible in both children's products themselves, and in the paint used on those products. The first round of restriction comes into force in August, the second in August 2011.

The restrictions will begin with paint, and progress to cribs, dummies, small parts, children's metal jewellery, baby bouncers, walkers, jumpers and eventually to nearly all children's products. Paint and similar surface coating material must be reduced from 600 ppm to 90 ppm (parts per million) of lead. In children's products, the new specified level is 300 ppm, with a further reduction to 100 ppm likely in two years. Sellers of used children's toys and equipment are exempt.

Tighter controls on timber imports for the UK market

In a sign of the times, reflecting stricter adherence to environmentally sustainable practice, UK furniture manufacturers are being warned to ensure that the timber products they import are from legal sources.

While such reporting is not yet mandatory, indications are that forthcoming legislative changes will make reporting of timber sourcing compulsory, and that the due diligence process will require a statement on chain of custody issues.

New safety standard for cots soon

A revised Australian / New Zealand Standard covering safety requirements for folding cots, household cots, bunks and high chairs is due late this year or early 2010.

The new Standard, which supersedes AS 2195:1999 Folding Cots (safety requirements) will provide regulatory authorities and manufacturers with essential safety performance criteria designed to reduce the likelihood of death or injury to infants.

Queensland government furniture procurement goes green

In an important move from one of the nation's largest purchasers of office furniture, the Queensland Government Chief Procurement Office has signaled its intentions to adopt a green and sustainability focus in its future purchases. With permission, Furntech-AFRDI is pleased to publish the Procurement Office's communication to industry.



INDUSTRY BRIEF

28 February 2009

Subject Queensland Government Office Furniture Arrangement

Background

The Queensland Government Chief Procurement Office (QGCPPO) manages whole-of-Government Standing Offer Arrangements (SOA) for a range of common use items that include office furniture. The QGCPPO intends to commence an open tender process shortly to establish a new three year SOA for office furniture.

Queensland Government agencies currently invest approximately \$50 - \$60 million per annum in the purchase of office furniture as a component of the Government's building capital works and office accommodation program.

The tender process will remain open for 28 days after offers are invited. The evaluation process is expected to take a further 90 days after the offer closes.

The new SOA arrangement will replace eleven regional based SOA's that were established in 2004 and are still current.

It is intended that the new SOA will be mandated across all budget funded agencies. This will include office furniture requirements for new office accommodation and refurbishments.

Future Office Furniture Arrangement

The new office furniture SOA will include work stations, chairs, desks, screens and steel furniture.

The supply market will be invited to offer a suitable product range for three categories, namely front office (reception), general office and executive office.

A key requirement of the specification of the new SOA will be for suppliers to demonstrate support for the Queensland Government's commitment to sustainable procurement and a five green star policy for new building projects. Offers will need to address issues such as the source and emission levels of materials and confirmation of the manufacturer's commitment to social and ethical responsibilities.

Encouragingly, supply market analysis has indicated that a focus on sustainable product is expected to attract a strong response from the office furniture manufacturing sector.

However, the sector will also be evaluated on their ability to distribute, install and provide support in regional areas of Queensland.

Quality of product will also be closely analysed through the requirement for mandated testing and certification of all office chairs.

The invitation will be advertised on the e-tender website, www.qgcpo.qld.gov.au.

Contact details

For further information on the Queensland Government office furniture arrangement, please contact Mr. Peter Cook at peter.cook@qgcpo.qld.gov.au.