



New directions at Furntech-AFRDI, with benefits for consumers and for industry

a message from Bob Panitzki, CEO Furntech-AFRDI

All of us here at Furntech-AFRDI feel that we've been undergoing something of a metamorphosis: after long years of working on essential research behind closed doors at an industry level, we're taking some new directions that are very public.

I'm talking of course about the work we have done over the last couple of years on developing a standard that identifies for consumers what really is leather, as distinct from some of the very clever materials that look like leather, but really are not.

One of the biggest furniture retailers in the land, Harvey Norman, has enthusiastically supported us at point of sale and through its advertising catalogues – you will now find the AFRDI label identifying real leather, and a booklet that explains what you can expect to get in terms of wear and life from the various grades of leather. We expect other retailers will follow on with this initiative.

So, as an organisation, we are coming out of the purely research-based mode we necessarily followed in the past, to establish standards and test procedures, now adopting a position where we have greater visibility in the consumer marketplace. I think it's an exciting time, one that will bring benefits for the local industry, under threat from ever-cheaper imports often selling on price alone.

As the fuel crisis forces society to grapple with what are still largely intangible concepts such as sustainability, and taking consumer actions that do minimum harm to the environment, I think we as a testing and certification organisation can be proud of what we are already doing to meet these ideals.

By encouraging enquiry about the provenance of raw materials, we can avoid further plundering of native forests, or of threatened species. By rigorously testing furniture, we persuade manufacturers to lift their game. The consumer benefits through better product, society benefits because the product has the potential to have a longer useful life. It is a practical example of the concept of sustainability.

Perhaps we are reaching a time when, in the interests of both consumer safety and of making a genuine commitment to sustainability and care for the environment, all furniture should be tested and certified.

Domestic furniture stability standard coming soon

Furntech-AFRDI is preparing a standard on stability of furniture. The standard focuses on bookcases and chests of drawers, and is a direct response to a number of accidents in which children have climbed on bookcases and shelving, and toppled them causing injury.

Two accidents in Western Australia involving children resulted in death, prompting the deputy state coroner, Evelyn Vicker SM, to press for an examination of ways to make tall furniture more stable, acknowledging that in a domestic environment, furniture may not always be used for its intended purpose, but may be, for example, used as a climbing challenge by young children.

Work on a standard for stability in furniture has now been under way for 18 months, and a draft has been circulated for peer review. Stability can be interpreted in many ways. One dictionary definition is 'the ability of an object...to maintain equilibrium or resume its original, upright position after displacement.'

Another simple way of looking at the question of stability, in furniture such as bookcases and shelving, is to consider the object as being unstable when its centre of gravity (CG) moves outside its baseline.

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So, while a tall bookcase and a low bookcase are inherently as stable as one another in a static vertical position, it is obvious that a tall, narrow-based bookcase need only to tip a short distance before its centre of gravity falls outside its base. We might consider it to be less stable.

The proposed standard is designed to distinguish between those items which are intrinsically stable and those that are not, in relation to the hazard posed by children up to the age of five climbing on them. How do we tackle the question of providing greater stability in furniture which lacks this quality to a large extent?

We can design a wider base, encouraging the majority of the weight to be placed down low, so that a considerable lateral displacement is required before the CG moves outside the baseline. Or we can simply ignore the question of where weight is placed within the structure, and make it stable by bolting it to a wall (while being careful to ensure that we are bolting to a wall stud, and that electrical wiring and plumbing is avoided).

AFRDI expects the new standard will provide the basis for a considerable improvement in safety in the domestic environment.

Flat Screen TV Hazard

Another potential hazard for young children in the home environment is emerging.

Consumer watchdogs in the United States are reporting a number of incidents in which large flat screen televisions, when placed on lightweight designer tables, are easily toppled.

As many screens weigh upwards of 50kg, the potential for injury is obvious. Many so-called television tables and low wall units are narrow-based, and offer little resistance to toppling when they have a tall heavy TV set placed on top.

Developing a green conscience: how much will it cost industry and the community?

As Australia considers the cost implications of the Garnaut Report on emissions, in the furniture industry, other cost pressures also are being felt as the industry necessarily moves towards more accountable environmental and sustainability practices.

Many furniture manufacturers are seeking certification for their range from Good Environmental Choice Australia. Like the AFRDI Blue Tick certification for furniture, and its assurance of quality, GECA certification gives consumers an understanding that the manufacturer is genuinely addressing issues that will reduce the impact of manufacturing processes on the planet.

Part of GECA certification for chairs, in particular, is that the manufacturers of certified products agree to take back the chairs once they have reached the end of their life. The chairs may either be broken down for component recycling or, if they're still in sound condition but perhaps just a little out of fashion, may be consigned to auction.

Take-back policies by individual manufacturers vary: what is an emerging constant is that the environmentally-worthy concept of recycling is going to have a direct cost, which industry will have to recover.

Don Moreton, of Gregory Commercial Furniture in Sydney, and a Furntech-AFRDI member and client, is currently assessing the cost of being green. Having gained GECA accreditation for part of the company's range in November 2007, response to the take-back scheme has been slow—only one consignment of chairs has been received for processing so far. So, while it is yet early days, Don says the company has to assess the cost of the scheme, while adhering to the principle that it is run on a not-for-profit basis.

It may be that in future, a loading will have to be placed on new product so that end-of-life obligations can be met.

"It is the cost of being a green supplier," Don Moreton says. "We are fully conscious of the need to meet emerging requirements for recycling and re-use, but we also have to survive as a business. We have to recover costs.

"I think we will have to develop a strategy that offers the least total cost impact, both to ourselves and to our customers, while still respecting the fact that ultimately, we have to change the way we have traditionally done business so that we reduce the cost to the environment."

"...industry will have to recover costs..."

Academic joins Furntech-AFRDI board



Dr Barbara Ozarska has joined the board of Furntech-AFRDI. Dr Ozarska has a long association with the organisation, having been a founding research director and lab manager. She holds a Masters Degree in Wood Technology, from the University of Agriculture, at Poznan, in Poland. She gained her doctorate in technical sciences from the same university.

From an early teaching career in Poland, she moved to Australia, to research positions with CSIRO and the University of Melbourne. Since 2001, Dr Ozarska has been Principal Research Fellow/Associate Professor, The University of Melbourne, Faculty of Land and Food Resources, School of Forest and Ecosystem Science.

Her interests include the co-ordination of independent and innovative research in furniture and veneer technologies and the development of microwave wood bending technology.

New Standards soon for Children's Bunk Beds

Children's bunk beds are coming under scrutiny.

The action comes from the ACCC, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, which is responsible for the administration of mandatory consumer product safety and information standards created under the Trade Practices Act 1974. This includes the Consumer Product Safety Standard for Bunk Beds, the subject of a forthcoming review.

In the meantime, however, and due to recent cases of non-compliance with this standard, the ACCC is conducting an information campaign to inform suppliers of bunk beds (including manufacturers, importers, wholesalers and retailers) about their legal requirements in supplying bunk beds under the mandatory standard.

Furtech-AFRDI is assisting the ACCC, by distributing to current Bunk Bed certificate holders the ACCC fact sheet *Bunk Beds: complying with the mandatory standard*, together with a copy of the Consumer Product Safety Standard for Bunk Beds.

AFRDI has also created a link to the ACCC website: www.accc.gov.au (the material is located in the Product Safety section on the website).



Why all the concern about bunk beds?

The ACCC quotes studies that show that in Australia at least 3850 bunk bed-related injuries to children under 15 are treated every year by hospital emergency departments or by general practitioners.

Of these cases, about 390 are estimated to result in hospital admission. Almost half of all bunk bed injury cases are in the five to nine-year age group and, of these, at least 180 need to be admitted to hospital.

Good reasons for being a Furtech-AFRDI member

We live in an age where more of the things we do every day are regulated: it's the cost of being part of a more technologically-based society, one that is constantly increasing in population, placing more pressure on resources, and on the environment. It is a society that is demanding accountability.

Society also is now more than ever demanding standards, and nowhere is this more evident than at the consumer level: today's consumer demands proof that a product has been certified fit for purpose, is of suitable quality, and offers the promise of long life – in short, they need assurance that a product represents good value. Business and government, for their part, need to know that furniture can fulfil OH&S requirements, and duty of care to employees.

Furtech-AFRDI, with its testing and certification programs, and its well-recognised Blue Tick and Orange Tick swing tags at point of sale, already has strong consumer recognition and acceptance. **Consumers look for the Furtech-AFRDI tick or label, much the same as they look for the Heart Foundation's healthy food tick.**

You may be aware that in association with Harvey Norman's furniture franchisees, AFRDI has recently launched a program that identifies real leather, further promoting the concept of quality to the consumer. Other retailers will use this initiative to leverage marketing advantages.

We expect the leather identification program will generate consumer demand for more widespread certification of furniture products. At the corporate level, new standards and tests are evolving to meet changing society demands for concepts such as sustainability and responsible use of resources.

This poses a fundamental question: can I afford not to be part of the assurance of quality that the market is asking for?

Our advice obviously is, take out membership and become an active member in the organisation that will be setting the standards for the furniture industry in Australia and New Zealand.

P.S. If you submit furniture for testing with us, generous discounts apply to Furtech-AFRDI members.

Reaching out

Furntech-AFRDI is building on a new line of work – testing for overseas.

We have been testing for the North American company Knoll, and have quoted recently for additional work. Knoll is headquartered in Pennsylvania, but also operates in Canada and in Europe.

The chairs we have tested so far are the Essential Work Chair (EWC) Pro Side and EWC Tech Side.

Knoll has a strong commitment to modern design, and this has yielded a comprehensive portfolio of furniture products and textiles, recognised as world design leaders.

The company's products are exhibited in major art museums, with more than 40 pieces in the permanent Design Collection of The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

While Furntech-AFRDI is an international-standard NATA accredited testing laboratory, our cost structure enables us to do testing at a lower price than comparable facilities overseas and, despite the cost of transporting furniture samples for testing, we are more than competitive.

The work with Knoll follows testing for IKEA of Sweden over the past six years of bunk beds and cots destined for the Australian market. Most of their articles are sourced from Eastern Europe.

New staff at Furntech-AFRDI



Toni Tyson-Donoley worked for Greening Australia in various project/extension officer roles for 12 years, specialising in native vegetation management. She has a Bachelor of Science (Hons) from the University of Queensland, and is currently in her first year of Bachelor of Environmental Design studies towards an architecture degree at the University of Tasmania. Toni joined Furntech-AFRDI as a testing officer in July 2008.



Stuart Paul joined as a part-time testing officer in June. Stuart is a passionate archer, but his great love is engineering, and he's a first-year engineering student at the Australian Maritime College. He intends to specialise in mechatronics, the science that drives robotics.

Enquiry into flame retardant

The European Chemical Agency (ECHA) has published a list of substances of very high concern, and is seeking consultation from industry users. Sixteen chemicals are identified as being of high concern. One is hexabromocyclododecane (HBCD).

HBCD or HBCDD is a brominated flame retardant. Its primary application is in extruded (XPS) and expanded (EPS) polystyrene foam used as thermal insulation in the building industry. It is also used to back coat fabric in upholstered furniture, automobile interior textiles, and car cushions.

ECHA is seeking comments on exposure, alternative substances and risks posed by the substances on the list.



Julian Ridgers has joined the team as marketing manager. He will also seek to expand AFRDI membership.

Julian has long experience in print, radio and television journalism, political support, and extensive work, since the late 90s, in the development of the then-emerging field of B2B e-commerce. He has also worked for the international marketing company, Ogilvie and Mather. He is currently completing a master's degree in architecture, and has commenced a master's degree in photography.

Reducing your company's carbon footprint isn't just some 'worthy' objective: it can save you money as well, according to British research.

In fact, David Storer, an English engineer who has been leading seminars focusing on the local and global impact of carbon emissions on the environment, says the adoption of lean manufacturing concepts can reduce an organisation's carbon footprint by as much as 20%.

David says a carbon reduction program can help pinpoint the main processes that affect the carbon footprint, and from that examination bottom line savings will flow.

YOUR FEEDBACK ON THIS BULLETIN IS WELCOMED. Please call Julian Ridgers at Furntech-AFRDI on (03) 6326 6155 or email: julian@furntech.org.au

Audit of AFRDI Leather Standard reveals some issues



The AFRDI Standard 146 - Leather Descriptions Furniture Industry - was prepared and released in April 2006 to provide the Australian and New Zealand commercial and residential furniture industry with a set of description and performance guidelines for leather, and with particular focus on making this information readily available to the consumer.

As part of its ongoing program to uphold standards, Furntech-AFRDI earlier this year audited more than 100 leather furniture products, later sending a summary of its findings to all leather certificate holders. Furntech-AFRDI CEO Bob Panitzki said the auditing process uncovered a number of issues.

"We are addressing these issues, in consultation with certificate holders, to ensure that the AFRDI Standard 146 remains a robust document.

"At the same time, we are impressing on users that if they have gained certification for a product, they have ongoing obligations to meet. We intend the Leather certificate to be regarded as a document of value, and having robust performance qualities."

Mr Panitzki said it was not the intention of Furntech-AFRDI to outline the nature of specific problems. He said individual certificate holders had been contacted, and he expected positive outcomes from the audit process which would benefit the furnishing industry.

An early reminder on Portacots

From the Infant and Nursery Products (INPAA) comes a reminder that the portacot regulation becomes mandatory from March 1 2009. An important component will be the requirement to have a warning not to use additional mattresses (thus making it easy for a baby to climb from the portacot). Suppliers therefore need to ensure that changes are made well in advance of next year's implementation date.

INPAA also points out that the new regulation applies at retail level from the same date, meaning that all lay-bys handed over to consumers from the beginning of March must also comply with the new regulation.

Supplier of bunk beds guilty of contempt

Following action by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, the Federal Court has declared that Hercules Iron Pty Ltd and its director, Mr Tom Hatz were guilty of contempt by failing to comply with court orders prohibiting supply of bunk beds that did not meet the mandatory product safety standard.

In February 2008 Justice Gordon of the Federal Court made final orders against Hercules Iron including restraining the company from supplying bunk beds that did not comply with the mandatory Trade Practices Act Product Safety Standard.

The ACCC's contempt proceeding followed the ACCC's identification of a number of 'Asteroid' and 'Comet' bunk beds supplied by the company after the February 2008 court orders.

In addition to declaring that Hercules Iron and Mr Hatz were both guilty of contempt of her earlier orders, Justice Gordon imposed a fine of \$10,000 on each of the company and Mr Hatz. Justice Gordon also ordered the parties to pay the ACCC's legal costs of the matter on an indemnity basis.

Australian children have died or been seriously injured through poor design of bunk beds. Mandatory standards are in place to minimise risk and non compliance with them is a serious matter. The ACCC actively enforces mandatory product safety standards and companies are well advised to ensure that they have proper processes in place to ensure compliance.

In handing down her reasons for judgment, Justice Gordon observed the conduct of Hercules Iron and Mr Hatz was not a technical violation of the law "but a violation directly and substantially impacting on health and safety issues."

ACCC Chairman, Mr Graeme Samuel, said the need for litigation could have been avoided if the company had done the correct thing in the first place by undertaking proper product recall action and getting its compliance processes in order.

Details of the product recall are available on the ACCC's recalls website, www.recalls.gov.au.