

End of the Road for Perennial Wood?

In my office, I have a box filled with samples of Perennial Wood's fine-looking acetylated wood decking and porch flooring; I also had plans to run an article in *PDB* sometime in 2014 on its installation. But a few weeks ago, Eastman Chemical Co. (which owns Perennial Wood) surprised the decking industry by announcing that it was discontinuing production. Though the decking was just introduced at the 2012 International Builders' Show, over the past couple of years the company had created a buzz with an active marketing campaign and an attractive product that seemed to be gaining a lot of momentum. What happened to derail it?

According to Tim Dell, Eastman's vice president of marketing, the decision was strictly a strategic one. Eastman Chemical derives only 15% of its business from residential construction products, a portfolio that also includes Heat Mirror insulating glass and Texanol (an additive for low-VOC coatings). Dell told me in a recent phone conversation that Eastman had to make a decision about its small Kingsport, Tenn., production facility—either build a new, bigger plant and scale up the business, or shut down the operation completely. “The product is great, but the economics just weren't sustainable,” said Dell.

I've spoken with a few builders who have installed Perennial Wood, and they agree for the most part with Dell's assessment about its quality. Some wondered, however, about its market niche: Is it competing against premium tropical hardwoods, or is it competing against PT southern pine? Perhaps this was the question that Eastman couldn't quite resolve.

Acetylation isn't a new technology. The process transforms the wood's cellular structure through a combination of heat, pressure, and acetic anhydride, replacing water-loving (hydrophilic) free hydroxyls within the wood with water-hating (hydrophobic) acetyl groups. Perennial Wood is produced from long, clear lengths of southern yellow pine, while UK-based Accoya (accoya.com)—the other major producer of acetylated wood—uses primarily radiata pine.

Dell emphasized that even though Eastman is stopping production of Perennial Wood, it will still support the brand by selling through current inventory and honoring product warranties. And Snively Forest Products (snivelyforest.com), one of two major distributors of Perennial Wood (the other is Boston Cedar; bostoncedar.com), says it has enough decking in its supply chain to meet demand well through the first quarter of the year.

More importantly, it doesn't look like acetylated wood decking will disappear from the marketplace after Snively sells through its inventory. Clark Spitzer, vice president of marketing at Snively, said in a press release that his company has opened discussions with a world leader in the development and commercialization of acetylated wood products. Whether that company is Accoya and exactly what that means is still unclear, but Spitzer told me in a recent email to expect a “big announcement” soon. As of press time, I hadn't heard any more news, but I'm crossing my fingers.

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