

SCIENCE ENVIRONMENT

Feds Investigate Oregon Company's African Rainforest Hardwood Products



By **Tony Schick** (OPB) and **Conrad Wilson** (OPB)
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Roseburg Forest Products, one of the country's leading manufacturers of particleboard and plywood, has ended production and sales of certain lumber products in the midst of a federal investigation into whether the wood came from the illegal logging of African rainforests.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement confirmed to OPB that its Homeland Security Investigations division has an ongoing investigation into illegal imports of okoumé, a wood used for plywood and veneer siding. [The Lacey Act](#) prohibits the trade of plants and wildlife taken, stored or transported illegally.

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Okoumé hardwood trees grow in the rainforests of west-central Africa, where the deforestation of habitat for endangered species is drawing the concern of conservationists and scientists alike. Okoumé is used in some of [Roseburg's Real Wood Siding](#) products, which are sold by major retailers including Home Depot and marketed as "environmentally friendly." Home Depot recently stopped accepting wood sourced from the Congo basin as part of a move to be more environmentally conscious.

Homeland Security Investigations works with overseas law enforcement to combat illegal logging, which the agency described as a complex crime: it begins in remote forests, travels vast distances across international borders and, according to the agency, changes hands through unscrupulous brokers, middlemen and importers that choose to look the other way.

By the time illegally harvested or imported hardwood reaches finished products, an ICE official said, consumers have no idea it might have been poached or sold through the black market.

Illegal logging also costs governments around the world roughly \$5 billion each year in lost tax revenue, according to World Bank estimates.

"It is an important part of HSI's enforcement strategy to focus on the criminal prosecution of exporters, importers, and middlemen who knowingly break the law, regardless of whether or not they reside in the U.S.," ICE spokeswoman Tanya Roman said. "These type of corrupt business practices weaken the rule of law, democracy, and principles of fair trade."

The HSI investigation relates to undercover work from a Washington, D.C.-based non-governmental organization known as the [Environmental Investigation Agency](#), which has a forthcoming report on the role of illegal logging and the black market trade of wood from the Congo.

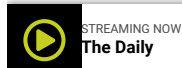
The Congo contains some of the world's largest undisturbed rainforests and habitat for endangered species including forest elephants, gorillas and okapis, but faces [considerable threats of forest loss](#).

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The okoumé veneer in question comes from a lush, flowering hardwood tree that can grow higher than 100 feet. A prominent timber resource in Gabon and the Republic of the Congo, okoumé has been [listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as a vulnerable species](#). Its color and attractive grain have made it a valued commodity as a decorative wood.

In a statement released in response to questions Friday, Roseburg Forest Products said it would cooperate with HSI and that the company was unaware of alleged issues with its okoumé suppliers until federal investigators called on March 11.

Roseburg purchased the okoumé veneer for use in siding products from two importers: Cornerstone Forest Products, based in Eugene, Oregon, and Evergreen Hardwoods, based in Mercer Island, Washington.



investigation and determine any impact on its overall procurement relationships with Cornerstone and Evergreen as this matter develops.”

Jim Green, the owner of Cornerstone and also supply manager for Evergreen, declined to comment on the Environmental Investigation Agency’s work because he had not yet seen the material. Green did not respond to questions sent via email.

“FYI I have not been to Africa in 15 years and have never visited Republic of Congo,” Green wrote to OPB.

Roseburg said that based on industry standards and the company’s own due diligence, it has no information indicating Cornerstone or Evergreen engaged in illegal activity.

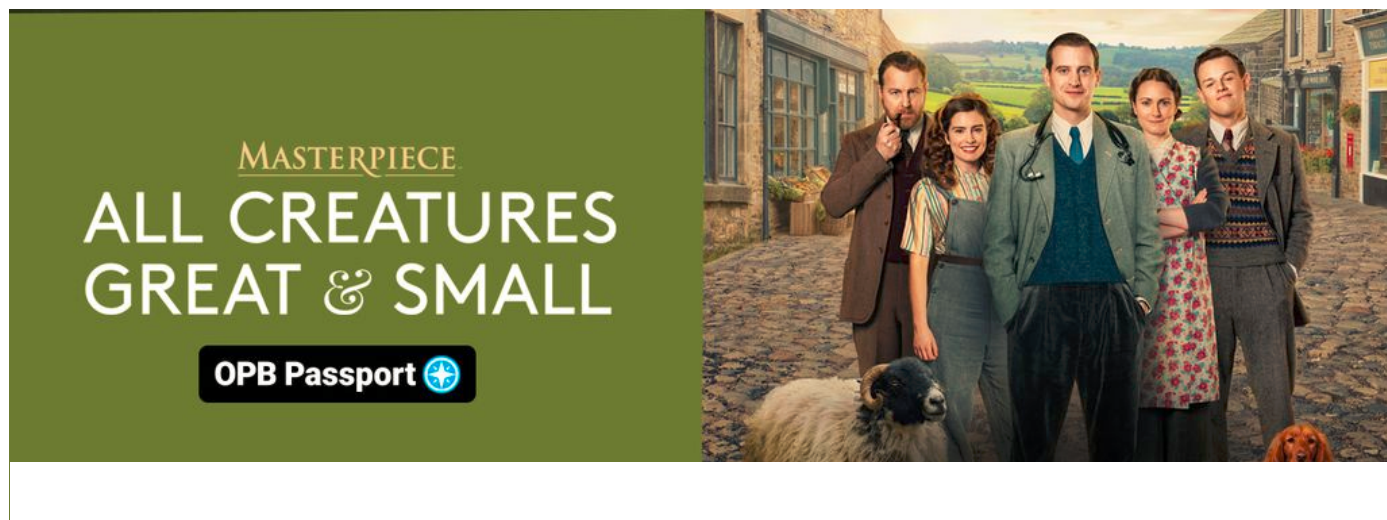
The company markets its [okuomé veneer plywood as GREENGUARD certified](#) and refers more broadly to its products as "America's most trusted wood siding."

Roseburg operates a compliance program designed to mitigate its risk of engaging in the trade of wood that has been illegally taken or transported in violation of the Lacey Act. This compliance program requires Roseburg’s suppliers to certify their products are in compliance with the law.

In 2018, Roseburg hired a company known as [DoubleHelix Tracking Technologies](#) to conduct "full, boots-on-the-ground, onsite supply chain audits" of its okoumé veneer sourced from Gabon and the Republic of the Congo, according to the company's statement.

Neither audit detected violations of the Lacey Act, Roseburg said, and the few risks identified in the audit were resolved to the company’s satisfaction.

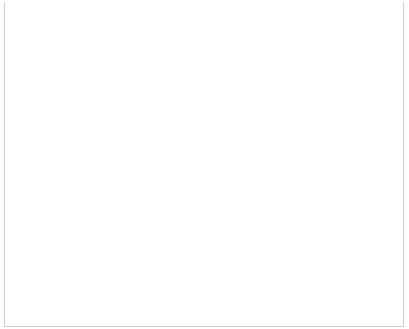
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