

# A SURVEY OF MILL MANAGERMENTS' AWARENESS OF KILN ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP AND ACTIVITIES

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## INTRODUCTION

Kiln associations (clubs) were first organized on the west coast in the 1930s by kiln foremen, sawmill managers, and members of trade associations. The purpose of the clubs was to improve the lumber seasoning industry through friendly cooperation and exchange of ideas. There were nine kiln clubs in the western United States and in British Columbia from the late 1940s to the early 1960s; presently two remain active and the third is attempting to reorganize. Throughout the years, the size of membership in the clubs has varied with the number of mills, management support, and market conditions; for example, the West Coast Dry Kiln Association had nearly 300 members in 1978 and only 175 in 1984.

During the last three to five years, there has been a steady decline in association membership, partly because of market conditions and mill closures. The attendance at meetings, including the annual meeting of the Western Dry Kiln Association, also is greatly reduced, which makes it difficult to organize well-planned meetings that have guest speakers and informative discussion.

The West Coast Dry Kiln Association conducted a survey to determine mill managements' awareness of kiln association membership and activities. The survey was in the form of a questionnaire mailed to 388 members of the Northwest Hardwood Association, the West Coast Lumber Inspection Bureau, and the Western Wood Products Association. Although only 79 (21%) of the questionnaires were returned, the respondents represent an excellent cross section of company personnel, vice presidents, superintendents, and kiln foremen.

Thirty of those responding were managers or executive officers, 28 were kiln foremen or superintendents, and 21 did not give their title. The questionnaire and responses are shown in Table 1. The number of replies to each question varies because all respondents did not answer all questions.

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<sup>1</sup> The tabulation and interpretation of this survey was completed by the author. The members of the committee making recommendations were Ralph Lulay, Frank Lumber Company; Doyle VanDeventer, Broughton Lumber Company; and John Harrold, Lumber Systems, Inc., who also prepared the original draft of the survey.

## RESULTS

### Company Awareness of Kiln Associations

Responses to Questions 1, 2, and 3 indicate that both mill managers and kiln foremen are not fully aware of the kiln associations and their activities. Nearly 40 percent of those responding "no" and "cannot say" to Question 1 are members; 13 percent of these are kiln foremen or superintendents. Almost all of the "yes" replies to Question 2 came from kiln foremen or sawmill superintendents; managers answered "cannot say." However, most of the "yes" replies to Question 3 came from mill managers, and 11 of the 37 "no" answers were from kiln foremen. This difference in response can be explained in part by the fact that management personnel probably have been with the company longer than the foremen and are more aware of hosting meetings. Also, 21 of the respondents did not give their job title.

### Importance of Drying in Mill Operation

Most (75%) of the mills placed a high priority on drying (Question 4), and those who rated it as having no priority were producers who market only green lumber. The replies to Question 5 also indicated that drying was an important part of the mill operation. Both managers and kiln foremen knew whether the company paid for travel to association meetings.

### Attendance at Annual Meetings

The kiln foremen who answered Question 6 knew that someone from their company attended the meeting, but nineteen managers either did not answer this question or erred with a "no" reply. Almost all of the managers, however, were correct in their response to the question about the 1985 meeting. Possibly, managers were aware of this meeting because they were deciding whether to permit employee travel.

### New Techniques and Instruments

Question 7 was difficult to answer because new instruments, such as miniprocessors, computers, and scanners, have not been applied to the dry kiln but have been installed in the sawing operation. A few companies have process controllers, but computerized control of linking the dry kiln demands to the boiler supply are being marketed. The 59 "no" responses (82%) to Question 8 show that the drying process is an essential part of lumber processing, because most mill managers want to have a knowledgeable and responsible person overseeing the drying operation, regardless of the level of automation.

### Career Background and Advancement

Sixty-eight responses (88%) indicated that a college degree was not a requirement for a kiln operator, but four companies did consider a degree necessary. Fifty-eight mills (74%) responded "yes" to Question 12, which asked whether company personnel

attended the lumber drying courses presented by several universities and laboratories. Again, this response illustrates the importance of the drying operation to mill management. Question 10 asked if a kiln operator can progress to become a superintendent; 36 mills (53%) stated "yes" and only 9 mills (13%) had "no" responses. Twenty-eight of the 36 "yes" replies were from management. Fifteen of the 23 "hard to judge" replies were from kiln foremen.

#### Improving Attendance at Meetings

In response to Question 11, company personnel listed topics that would encourage better attendance at meetings. Most (about 70%) of these replies came from kiln foremen and superintendents. Although management personnel selected similar topics, their responses reflected consideration of the entire sawmill operation. The topics considered most relevant to kiln drying were applied drying techniques and kiln maintenance. These topics have been of major concern to kiln foremen since founding the kiln associations in the 1930s and 1940s.

#### Increasing Participation in Kiln Associations

The replies to Question 13 indicate that the depressed lumber market is the major cause of poor participation in associations. Twenty-three replies (24%) state that the meeting program and speakers were of no interest. This sentiment is reflected throughout the lumber industry; many mills have closed and others do not host meetings because overtime pay and unexpected costs may be incurred. Also, it is very difficult to invite speakers when only 15 to 20 people attend a meeting. Nineteen replies (20%) state that lack of encouragement from management to attend meetings is the cause of poor participation; these replies came from kiln foremen. Lack of personal interest or incentive was stated by nine management replies out of the 11 received. This difference in response suggests a breakdown of communication between kiln foremen and mill managers. As a partial solution to this communication problem, the Western Wood Products Association will include a notice of the California Dry Kiln Association and West Coast Dry Kiln Association meetings in their weekly newsletter, Plumb Line.

#### Recommended Programs for Meetings

In the replies to Question 14, both managers and kiln foremen said that the presentation of specific topics by knowledgeable speakers would be beneficial to the company. They also felt that discussion of common problems and communication between personnel in the drying operation and in management would make participation in meetings worthwhile.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The responses to this survey indicate that most of the respondents, whether foremen, managers, or other personnel, are aware of kiln associations. The communication, however, between

the kiln foremen and mill managers appears to be poor. In certain companies, some managers know about the activities of the kiln associations and are members, but the kiln foreman does not attend meetings or is unaware of such organizations. In other companies, the situation is reversed: the kiln foreman is a member and attends meetings if his travel costs are covered, but the managers are unaware of kiln associations.

Drying has a high priority in the overall mill operation, as shown by the responses to Question 4. This view is supported by the fact that many mills asend their personnel to courses on lumber drying and that some mills are hiring college graduates as kiln foremen. Most of the companies felt that operation of the dry kilns requires an experienced person and that a kiln foreman could advance and become a superintendent.

The desired topics for kiln association meetings remain about the same as in the past, except that more people want information on electronic instrumentation. All of the respondents want informative meetings, with talks given by knowledgeable speakers. They also want to discuss problems and to share ideas with management.

The problems of depressed market conditions and tight money were given as the reasons for reduced membership and attendance. There were no suggestions for changing the format of meetings to improve this situation.

Table 1. Questionnaire and Responses

1. Is your company a member of a dry kiln club?  
a. Yes-28      b. No-39      c. Cannot say-6
2. Has your company benefited by having a membership?  
a. Yes-25      b. No-12      c. Cannot say-30
3. Has your company ever hosted a kiln meeting?  
a. Yes-26      b. No-37      c. Cannot say-7
4. What priority on the overall sawmill operation does lumber drying command?  
a. High-55      b. Medium-16  
c. None-2      d. Low-0
5. Does your company currently pay the expenses for your personnel to attend dry kiln club meetings?  
a. Yes-39      b. No-21      c. Has in the past-8
6. The 36th Annual Meeting of the Western Dry Kiln Clubs was held May 9-11, 1984 in Reno, Nevada. The attendance represented about 60 operating mills, 10 equipment suppliers, and 15 laboratories or universities. The 1985 meeting will be held in Vancouver, B.C.  
Did you send a representative to the 1984 meeting?-13  
Considering attendance at the 1985 meeting?-28
7. Has "Hi-Tech" in sawmill operations had a negative effect on organizations like the W.C.D.K.A.?  
a. Yes-3      b. No-15      c. Cannot say-49
8. Have "State of Art" techniques regarding instruments, moisture content controls, and other modern devices made kiln drying a cut-and-dry operation, whereby anyone can be assigned to watch the kilns?  
a. Yes-0      b. No-59  
c. More or less-7      d. Cannot say-6

9. Does your company hire college graduates with forestry degrees as kiln operators?
  - a. Yes-3
  - b. No-68
  - c. Any college degrees-1
  - d. Cannot say-5
10. Can today's kiln operators progress to the point of being superintendents?
  - a. Yes-36
  - b. No-9
  - c. Hard to judge-23
  - d. High turnover, doubt it-0
11. Would any of the following encourage you or your people to start attending monthly meetings?
  - a. Basic kiln drying techniques-44
  - b. Maintenance-39
  - c. Planermill topics-26
  - d. Miniprocessors-26
  - e. Energy requirements-23
  - f. Grade recovery-15
  - g. Travel distance or no advance notice-5
12. Have you or any of your kiln drying personnel attended the lumber drying courses presented by the universities or laboratories in the western United States or British Columbia?
  - a. Yes-58
  - b. No-17
  - c. Would not attend-3
13. Participation is down to an all-time low in the dry kiln clubs. Can you make a brief statement in your opinion as to the possible cause?
 

Present economy and costs-37

Meeting program of no interest-23

Lack of management involvement-19

Lack of interest or no incentive-11

Long travel-4

Social organization-1
14. What demonstrations, training seminars, or interaction of company personnel, related to your sawing, drying, and planing operations, would be beneficial for you to encourage company personnel to attend?
 

Specific topics with selected speakers-30

Sharing and discussion of problems, as in past-19

Sharing and communication with management-18

Case histories and problems-7

All input or training by company-3

Host mill operating equipment-2

Social organization-1