

TTJ reports UK hardwood sales improving

The UK hardwood trade may not be back to normal, and there is continuing anxiety about the effect of a second COVID-19 wave, but the sector has seen sales improving since May. This is according to the latest November/December 2020 hardwood market report in the UK Timber Trades Journal (TTJ - www.ttjonline.com).

“In April we were at 40% of normal turnover, but we hit 60% in May, 80% in June and July was a good month, not on budget, but ahead of last year,” said a UK importer-distributor. “It’s not business as usual yet, but we’re in a better place than anticipated four months ago.”

Another importer agreed. “Our recovery to 85-90% of normal sales was remarkably swift,” they said. “In September, while growth continued, it did start to plateau. Local Covid lockdowns, and talk of a rise in unemployment as government winds down pandemic support measures are resulting in customer caution. So we expect it will be tougher to claw back that final 10-15% and that we’ll be that much below budget for the year. But we’re still more positive than we were.”

As elsewhere in Europe, the strongest demand for hardwood in the UK currently is coming from home improvement and DIY. “Consumers unable to go on holiday are investing in their houses instead,” said a UK importer. “So we’re seeing good sales to staircase, kitchen, window and cladding manufacture and landscaping.”

In contrast, the shopfitting sector is weak. “More robust stores used lockdown to refurbish, but shopfitting overall has taken some steps backward,” said an importer-distributor. In terms of product, another said they’d seen best recovery in modified, engineered and semi-processed items.

While demand generally has been on the increase, however, so too, it seems, have supply issues due to pandemic fallout.

“It’s harder to buy wood from a lot of places than to sell it,” said an importer. “Sawmills reduced output due to Covid. Importers also reduced or stopped buying for a period. So there’s a lot of inventory catch-up to be done, but there isn’t one continent where you can simply get your product wish list.”

Another importer reported supply gaps. “We haven’t got every thickness we need on the ground and don’t expect to have for weeks,” they said.

African supply to the UK has tightened due to mills taking pandemic precautionary measures, plus, said one importer, the UK’s favoured species sapele being ‘less abundant in current harvesting cycles’. The UK is ‘well-stocked on sapele, but not overstocked’.

UK importers also report continuing disconnect between sapele cost and selling prices. “The cost price is firm, and the pound weakening against the euro has had an inflationary effect, but the market absorbs it,” said one trader. “Clearly some people need to turn stock into cash.”

UK importers are expecting sapele prices to gradually pick up, followed by sipo, which had been weakening. Iroko prices had also been drifting down but are now reported stable. Due to mills’ Covid measures, plus importers earlier asking for orders to be held back, lead times on African generally have extended.

Meanwhile, according to TTJ, the UK remains resistant, compared to the rest of Europe, to secondary African species and to engineered African products.

Asian prices are described as volatile by UK importers, and freight rates from the region have also been rising.

“The Malaysian ringgit’s fluctuation against the dollar has made the situation very unpredictable,” said one importer. “Prices are now level with three months ago, but they’ve been up and down several times in the interim.” Meranti supply was described as tight due to lockdown and wet weather impacting harvest.

European sawn hardwood production forecast to fall 25% this year

Speaking to the UK Timber Trade Federation (TTF) Temperate Hardwood Webinar on 18 November, Maria Kiefer-Polz, Vice President for Hardwood at the European Sawmillers Organisation (EOS) suggested that sawn hardwood production in member countries may have declined by up to 25% this year.

After a period of stability between 2016 and 2019, when sawn hardwood production in EOS member countries fluctuated between 5.44 million cu.m and 5.54 million cu.m, EOS forecasts production will fall by up to 25% to around 4.10 million cu.m in 2020, before rising around 20% to 4.79 million cu.m in 2021.

The forecast refers to total production in the 11 European countries in the scope of EOS: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, Latvia, Norway, Romania and Sweden.

A significant fall in sawn hardwood production is projected in all three of the largest European producing countries which together account for more than three quarters of all EOS production: France where production is expected to fall 15% to 1.24 million cu.m; Germany, where a 20% decline to 950,000 cu.m is forecast; and Romania, with an expected decline of 44% to 900,000 cu.m.

Drawing on reports from national hardwood sawmillers associations, Ms. Kiefer-Polz also informed the TTF Webinar on the market situation for European sawn hardwood in each of the three main producing countries.

In France, hardwood sawmillers report that demand in the domestic and wider European market has slowed since September. Although overall demand in Asia has been low this year, a high proportion of oak logs continue to be shipped to China. In the beech sector, there is weak demand for lower grades. French sawmills are struggling to procure ash logs as increasing quantities are now being shipped to Vietnam.

German sawmillers report that the market has become extremely unpredictable and volatile. As in France, large quantities of German beech and ash logs are being exported to China and Vietnam.

Demand for German sawn hardwood in the European furniture sector has weakened with the decline in manufacturing and sales during lockdown. However, the German joinery sector has been very busy in the second half of the year. Overall profits of German hardwood sawmills are expected to be lower this year as costs have risen. Some German hardwood mills may be forced to close.

In Romania, there is declining demand for sawn hardwood in both China and the Middle East. Romanian sawmillers report that buyers in both export regions are pushing for lower prices. The market situation in Egypt is only slightly better.

During the summer months, the supply of logs in Romania was very tight as half the harvesting companies have closed. In the current situation, sawmills have little incentive to sell and many are waiting on developments and operating at much reduced capacity.

Ms. Kiefer-Polz noted that overall exports of sawn hardwood by EOS countries declined sharply in the first half of 2020, a trend affecting all the main export destinations. Unlike in the softwood sector, European sawn hardwood exports to the US did not experience any increase in demand this year.

Exports of European sawn hardwood to the key Asian markets, led by China and Vietnam, have been subdued this year, particularly impacting on sales of lower grades of oak. Sales to the North Africa and the Middle East have also been weak, undermining demand for beech.

In addition to the COVID crises, European sawn hardwood exports this year are impaired by the relative strength of the euro against the dollar and other currencies.

Nevertheless, European sawmills continue to complain about the high quantities of higher value hardwood logs being exported to China (with volume of oak, ash and beech in excess of 2 million cu.m in 2019).

According to Ms. Kiefer-Polz, log supply problems for European hardwood mills are being made worse due to severe drought in parts of central Europe which has particularly damaged the beech resource, combined with the impact of oak lace bug infestation and ash dieback.

European domestic markets for sawn hardwood are also under pressure. Ms. Kiefer-Polz noted that “the value of EU27+UK wood furniture production was €42.5 billion in 2019, 1.4% less than the previous year”.

Furthermore, “in retrospect, it seems the rebound in EU wood furniture production following the 2008 economic rises peaked as early as 2017, as 2019 was the second straight year of decline. Last year, EU wood furniture production was still 20% down, in real terms adjusted for inflation, compared to the years just prior to the 2008 crises”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has damaged market prospects further in 2020 with many furniture retailers closed for long periods during the crisis.

The situation in the parquet industry is not quite so negative, but mixed, according to Ms. Kiefer-Polz. Drawing from the most recent official statement by FEP (European Parquet Federation), overall stable consumption is forecast this year, helped by the continuing strength of the housing market and renovation activities.

However, the recent upsurge in the pandemic which has led to new lockdown measures throughout large parts of Europe, is creating more uncertainty. There is also concern about the long-term economic effects with the significant build-up of government debt and rising levels of unemployment across the continent.

Vandecasteele emphasise value of business model built on resilience and sustainability

The need to build a resilient business model in uncertain times was the theme of a presentation by Isabelle Polfiet and Genevieve Standaert of Vandecasteele Houtimport, a leading European wood importer and distributor based in Belgium, to the Sustainable Tropical Timber Coalition webinar on 19 November.

The two speakers emphasised that while the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and wider society have been devastating, there can be a silver lining for companies that have focused on resilience and sustainability in their business planning.

For the hardwood sector, they highlighted that the COVID lockdown measures contributed to booming demand in the European DIY sector as people, closely confined to their own homes, have been encouraged to adapt and improve their living environment.

On the other hand, the supply side has become very challenging and prices for new stock have been rising. A lot of tropical suppliers are struggling to deal with a backlog of delayed orders, with containers regularly held up at the ports.

Supplies from Brazil have been hit particularly hard, with numerous cancelled contracts as logging operations were curtailed earlier in the year and have now halted during the rainy season. They also suggested that “Malaysia has been in continuous lockdown since March and prices [for Malaysian sawn wood] are expected to rise further”.

However, the market situation has been beneficial for those companies in Europe, like Vandecasteele, that carry stock, particularly if they have already invested in digital product handling and sales.

According to the Vandecasteele representatives, the company has built a stock holding of 120,000 cu.m of timber, including over 81 species of tropical hardwoods. Whereas 15 years ago, all buyers would physically inspect consignments of timber before procurement, following a large investment in IT systems at the company, all transactions can now be carried out on-line.

At the same, Vandecasteele has made a policy commitment to exceed environmental legislation and support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in its business activities, a commitment for which it was recently awarded UN “SDG Pioneer Certificate”.

It was emphasised that if “sustainability means anything, it surely means resilience – shock resistance – in the face of threats such as to COVID. It also means that business needs to be generation neutral, leaving the environment in better shape for the next generation. This in turn requires loyalty, to customers, suppliers, and staff”.

As part of their commitment, Vandecasteele aim to trade only in “certified sustainable” timber by 2025. It was noted that “EUTR was a wake-up call for us, putting us under a lot of pressure and helping us push forward with this transition” and suggested that “we must all be ambassadors for certified timber”.

However, it was also acknowledged that certification “needs investment” and that Vandecasteele “does not drop suppliers”, preferring to “work with them to find solutions”. Vandecasteele’s approach is to employ consultants to identify gaps in certification capacity and to work out solutions with their suppliers.

It was also noted that current shortages on the supply side could be “turned into an opportunity to promote certified lesser used species...While it takes a lot of time and effort to encourage buying of lesser used species, using more will improve livelihoods and reduce pressure on better known commercial species.”

African timber industry helps build healthcare infrastructure during pandemic

Recent reports have highlighted the key role that African timber companies are playing to support the development and maintenance of essential healthcare infrastructure during the pandemic.

Tullia Baldassarri of INTERHOLCO AG, which is headquartered in Switzerland and whose subsidiary IFO manages 1.159 million ha of certified forest in Ngombé in the Republic of Congo (RoC),

presented details of the company's response to the COVID pandemic to the STTC webinar on 19 November.

INTERHOLCO have invested in medical facilities and equipment against increased incidence of the disease in RoC. With strategies aimed at both prevention and treatment, the focus has also been on health education and sharing knowledge and best practice.

It was noted that there are over 1200 workers at IFO site in the northern part of RoC, which is 800km from the capital Brazzaville. The Ngombé concession area also supports a much larger population of 16,000.

Healthcare infrastructure in this region is limited, so INTERHOLCO has developed a joint plan with the state for prevention and mitigation of the COVID pandemic. INTERHOLCO spent over €200,000 (FCFA francs 130 million) on pandemic measures, while the German Development Corporation-backed Programme for the Promotion of Certified Forest Management (PPECF) contributed €70,000.

"We raised further amounts through an international crowd funding initiative," said Ms. Baldassarri. "Contributors included customers, NGOs and business partners and we also had donations of PPE."

INTERHOLCO's Ngombé hospital was set up in 2000. Since then it has doubled in size and today includes an operating theatre, maternity facilities and a pharmacy. "For the pandemic, we bought four ventilators and three oxygenators," said Ms. Baldassarri. "We also ordered large volumes of PPE; gloves, screens and 30,000 masks and set up hand wash and temperature reading stations."

Healthcare awareness raising and training was another aspect of INTERHOLCO's strategy and, to ensure continuity of supply, it set up a local tailors' cooperative to make face masks.

"We provided over 5,000 hand-made masks to our neighbours, Odzala Kokoua National Park and in all distributed 18'500 to local and indigenous communities in 30 villages," said Ms. Baldassarri.

"We produced infographics on mask use, distancing and hand washing, while our social team trained local communities in disease prevention. We also ensured truck drivers from the port of Douala in Cameroon were kept isolated from our workers and local people via a cordon sanitaire."

There is a public hospital in Ngombé, but it had no running water or electricity. INTERHOLCO also fixed that and provided 40 beds plus medical supplies to convert it into a quarantine unit. INTERHOLCO's hospital could consequently continue to admit patients, separate from suspected COVID-19 cases.

INTERHOLCO said the exchange of information between companies on tackling the crisis in the region has proved invaluable. "Also helpful were pandemic webinars organised by IDH-the Sustainable Trade Initiative," said Ms. Baldassarri. "Input from companies in Liberia was particularly useful, given their Ebola experience."

So far, incidence of Covid-19 in northern RoC has not been high. At the hospital in Ngombé 30 people have tested positive, with a further 50 likely to have had the disease, but currently no cases in the state hospital. Generally cases so far in the concession area have been mild, or asymptomatic.

One reason for the relatively low impact of Covid-19 in the area is thought to be demographics, with just 3% of the population in Central Africa being over 65 compared to 20% in UK or France. But INTERHOLCO believes the measures they've taken, in association with other companies and local authorities, have contributed to curbing disease spread. Given the unpredictable course of the pandemic, they know too that efforts must be ongoing.

According to a report by Mike Jeffree for the STTC and Fair&Precious program, CIB-Olam has also been very proactive in responding to the pandemic in RoC, both in support of its own workforce and the wider community. The company has a direct and indirect workforce of 2000, while the population of Pokola and surrounding region, where it has its main facilities is 20,000. Local communities around its other sites are home to a further 40,000 people.

CIB-Olam's hospital in Pokola undertakes over 40,000 consultations every year, serving employees and local populations, and its clinics at other operations, although mainly for the workforce, also treat local people in serious cases.

"We've been in northern Congo for 52 years and are one with communities around us," said head of corporate responsibility Vincent Istace. "Our response to the threat had not only to be for employees and their families, but the entire local population and business partners."

CIB-Olam says its spend to date on COVID response measures has been €450,000 (CFA francs 300 million). "We received €60,000 from the PPECF, and paid the rest ourselves," said Mr Istace. "And we estimate we'll spend around a further €100,000 this year."

Providing PPE for local people took €189,000 of CIB-Olam's budget. The company also, of course, provided PPE for its workforce and installed barriers and implemented other safe work procedures at its premises. In addition, it set up hand wash and temperature check points at its sites and in local communities.

"We constructed a quarantine unit for suspected and confirmed cases next to our hospital, provided barrier measure training in all concessions and, with local authorities, established an ambulance evacuation plan for people with the disease," said Mr Istace. "We started immuno analysis in our clinical laboratory and bought detection kits for testing all employees."

Elsewhere, Rougier in Gabon has set up hand-washing and temperature check points, issued PPE and undertaken a comprehensive health awareness programme. Its pandemic strategy has also included setting up quarantine zones at forest sites and liaison with the national Covid-19 steering committee.

Pallisco-CIFM in Cameroon has worked with subcontractors and local communities to raise awareness on social distancing and other preventative measures. It has bought medical equipment and PPE and increased medicine stocks at medical facilities near its sites.

Steps taken by Precious Woods, also in Gabon, have included distribution of hygiene equipment, establishment of temperature check points, investment in medical equipment, introduction of social distancing measures and compulsory wearing of facemasks on its vehicles.

Renewed interest in further processing of tropical timber in Central Africa

An article by trade journalist and commentator Mike Jeffree for the STTC and Fair&Precious highlights renewed interest in further processing of tropical timber in Central Africa prior to export.

Mike Jeffree notes the "growing government commitment in a number of African countries to help their timber industries transition from being primary material producers, to become further processing, value added manufacturers".

This was underlined at the September meeting of CEMAC, the Economic Community of Central Africa, where a proposal to ban log exports from the entire Congo Basin on January 1, 2022 was

approved by ministers from the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Gabon and Chad.

Central African governments also backed establishment of economic zones for primary, secondary and third-stage timber transformation and to set up the CRIB, the Regional Committee for Sustainable industrial Development of the Timber Industry.

Mike Jeffree suggests that “at the outset there was scepticism about prospects for developing value-added tropical timber production in Africa”. However, according to Jeffree, “companies in the field say they’re proving the doubters wrong. It’s still a work in progress, but further processing operations are establishing a solid base and the resulting products, made using latest machinery, are demonstrating their technical credentials, cost and environmental benefits”.

To drive the message home, Mike Jeffree interviewed Christophe Janssen, production manager and VP of sales and production at INTERHOLCO which started making FSC-certified finger-jointed laminated scantlings at its IFO facility in Ngombe in the RoC in 2012.

Mr Janssen acknowledges that initially it wasn’t an easy sell: “Established customers for logs and sawn timber from our production were conservative and didn’t want to take a risk with these new products,” he said. “People said you couldn’t do value added production in Africa, even though it was established elsewhere in the tropics, in Asia and South America. They assumed there would be glue problems with scantlings, and they’d cause machining difficulties.

“It was a case of finding a different type of customer willing to try something new. Once we did that, we were then approached by our traditional customers interested in running trials, after which they placed orders and kept coming back!”

The key from the start was to focus on consistent quality and performance. Some early engineered products from other African producers, Mr Janssen acknowledged, had not been the best. Some mixed species and used lesser quality material for the central layer of laminated scantlings, obviously a critical issue for window makers.

“We began by investing in some of the best processing technology available, from Weinig, so we could be sure of uniformity, correct finger jointing pressures and so on. We’ve also continued to upgrade since, with a further major reequipment in 2016,” said Mr Janssen.

“In addition, as we have our own forest concessions, we can guarantee all our raw material will come from the same source, that there’ll be no mixing. We have complete control of what’s going into the production process and we’ve now demonstrated that the products are reliable, based on tried and tested manufacturing processes, backed by regular quality audits and can match anything else on the market.”

INTERHOLCO also focused resources on training personnel in the manufacturing process and to use state-of-the-art, automated technology.

“We put in place very clear procedures and produced photographic how-to guides,” said Mr Janssen. “And our people are very enthusiastic. They were proud to be involved in what was quite a pioneering venture for Africa.”

The scantling plant, which now has annual capacity of 5,000 cu.m. Its products have also been accredited to standard CTB-LCA 221 by French timber technical institute FCBA. “To have this accreditation, alongside FSC certification is a definite marketing benefit,” said Mr Janssen.

IHC scantlings now come in a range of variants in different species using four-side clear lamellas; KKK (three layers of finger jointed lamellas), DKD (with solid outer layers and finger jointed mid-layer), plus on demand products with two, three or more layers.

“Some end-users are concerned their customers won’t like a finger-jointed outer layer, but consumers today see finger-joints across the range of products. They’re used to them,” said Mr Janssen.

INTERHOLCO’s market pitch for the products is that they provide stability, predictable yield and proven machining performance, and that the timber is 100% sourced from its FSC-certified forest concessions.

According to INTERHOLCO, European customers are now reporting the benefits of African laminated scantlings. “One Belgian window manufacturer couldn’t compete in plastic or aluminium with the big producers and was struggling with tropical hardwood lumber because he couldn’t accurately calculate yield or costs,” said Mr. Janssen.

“That changed with our laminated scantlings. They cut waste and enabled the business to budget more effectively, as well as produce a window that could take on the man-made material competition in terms of consistent quality and performance. He said it helped save the company.”

Sapele is the IHC factory’s main raw material, but it is also manufacturing in Kosipo and developing use of Tali, Bossé, Sipo, Limbali and Padouk, all FSC-certified.

“All these species have different characteristics, of course, and may demand different processing approaches,” said Mr Janssen. “Kosipo, for instance, which is more durable than Sapele, needs different tooling. But customers are now happily using it and Limbali is particularly suited to smaller manufacturers looking for a niche material.”

Utilising the range of species, says INTERHOLCO, contributes to sustainable use of the forest and, it maintains, these other varieties are cost competitive.

“Padouk is more expensive, but there isn’t more than 10% price difference between the others,” said Mr Janssen.

INTERHOLCO will look to introduce products in other species, but it’s not an overnight process. “From initial testing of the timber, through development of the right manufacturing approach to trialing with customers, it generally takes two years to bring a new species to market,” said Mr Janssen.

INTERHOLCO’s biggest scantlings market is France, followed by Germany and Belgium, and it’s starting to sell in Portugal and Spain. The UK and USA are proving slower to come around, but Mr Janssen believes it will happen. “They are perhaps more traditional markets, but we have sent trial bundles to both. It will just take time.”

INTERHOLCO is upbeat about prospects for further developing its further processing business.

“There are opportunities for more specialist items for particular industries,” said Mr Janssen. “That potentially includes laminated beams and other construction products. Softwood currently dominates this market, but with hardwood’s superior strength to weight, you could use less timber to do the same job and have smaller dimension products.”

Expanding opportunities for lesser used certified hardwoods in Europe

Responding to the overall decline in availability of the commercially most popular tropical species, particularly if certified, and the objective of improving returns to sustainable tropical forest operations, tropical wood marketing activities in Europe led by the STTC and the ATIBT Fair&Precious campaigns are focusing heavily on promoting lesser used species (LUS).

These activities combine testing of the technical properties of LUS with close monitoring of market developments to identify emerging niche applications for which these species are well adapted and to allow targeted communication campaigns.

This approach is well illustrated by a civil engineering application testing program of a range of tropical certified LUS at a marina facility in the Netherlands, on-going now for 10 years which will soon come to fruition with publication of a full set results on the STTC website in the coming weeks (<http://www.europeansttc.com/>).

Funding for the testing program is from FSC Netherlands and the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water, with financial contributions from Van Swaay Harlingen BV, GWW Houtimport BV and Precious Woods Europe BV who also provided part of the timber in 2009.

The assessment was undertaken by the Stichting Hout Research (SHR, a testing and knowledge institute for o.a. timber) at the Houtexpo duurzame waterbouw site (Sustainable wood for waterways expo) in Akkrum. The latter was established in 2009 and forms part of a working marina, so the material is effectively tested in real life situations.

Some of the timber has been evaluated in water contact, with a view to use in such applications as pile planking, with other types tested in different forms, such as decking and beams. A particular focus was to test the various hardwoods in applications where they are currently not generally used.

Among the more than 20 species involved in the project, which also included some temperate varieties, are Muiracatiara, Sapupira, Angelim da Campina, Fava Amargoza, Acariquar, Gindya udu (Tanimbuca) and Manbarklak.

SHR undertook field evaluation of the timber in situ at the Houtexpo, comprising visual inspection and strength and resistance testing, followed by testing of samples at its laboratory.

At the recent STTC webinar, it was highlighted that additional new opportunities for tropical LUS in the European market may arise from a forthcoming EU ban on creosote for wood treatment.

John Williams, a Principal Consultant at the structural engineering group, RSK, noted that it is highly likely that the EU will ban creosote in 2021. He also mentioned that the UK alone uses 10,000 cu.m of creosoted softwood each year.

In response to the anticipated ban, end users are now looking at cast concrete, steel or plastics as alternatives. According to Mr Williams “there may also be an opportunity for tropical hardwood, but it will need investment, determination and momentum”.

Mr Williams went on to say that “this may be too much for an individual private sector exporter, but possibly an area that would benefit from government/forest department funding. The industry already uses azobe/ekki, but there are many candidates out there.

One alternative highlighted by Mr Williams was okan/denya which, he said, “has excellent strength and durability and could be seen as a substitute for ekki/azobe for many structural applications: bridge, rail and smaller costal engineering projects”.

“We managed to prove D40 (BDS EN1912) strength properties (bending strength as actually 49 N/mm²) which is just short D50” and suggested that “with a bit more work it shouldn’t be too difficult to get okan over the D 50 mark.

Gombé is another African hardwood identified for further market development in an article by Mike Jeffree prepared for STTC and Fair&Precious. Drawing on an interview with Emmanuel Groutel, head of sales development, marketing and communication at Port Gentil-based Compagnie des Bois du Gabon (CBG), the article highlights just how wide ranging is the species, both in terms of geography and potential applications.

CBG began its gombé development programme seven years ago, seeing significant commercial opportunities for the timber, given its abundance and versatility.

“It’s most common in Gabon, Cameroon and the Central African Republic, but occurs across all West African rainforest, from Liberia and Sierra Leone to the Republic of the Congo,” said Mr Groutel. “Greater quantities could be exported with no adverse effect on sustainability.”

The company bills the species as an alternative to sapele, African mahogany and dark red meranti and says it is suited to make a wide variety of end products. The extensive list on its website (www.cbg-wood.com) ranges from plywood and veneers, through interior and exterior (in ‘temperate’ areas) joinery, to mouldings, staircases, coffins and vehicle and container flooring.

“Gombé has good machining and finishing properties, it poses no particular kilning issues, gives good screw and nail retention, and it’s suited to all the most commonly used glues,” said Dr Groutel. “It can also be peeled and used to make finger-jointed and laminated components.”

Gombé trees can grow over 50m high, and the trunk is practically cylindrical for 20-25m from its short, thick buttresses, resulting in well-shaped logs with diameters up to 1.2m. “The sapwood is whiteish to yellowish and the heartwood salmon pink, sometimes with a few greenish-brown veins,” said Dr Groutel. “The grain is mostly straight, with some occasional slight interlocking.”

CBG has been developing its production facilities so that a significant proportion of its sawn timber output (in gombé and okoumé) is now kiln-dried and it is currently upgrading drying facilities further. It has also overhauled its dust extraction system and installed two new edge trimmers.

CBG describes the market response to gombé as positive, with many customers placing regular repeat orders after trialing the material. Main markets are currently China, Italy, Spain, Pakistan, France and UAE. CBG says there is potential to double production in response to demand.

Responding to EU demand for Environmental Product Declarations

The ATIBT, in association with member companies, has initiated a project to develop Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs) and Environmental and Health Declaration Sheets (FDES) for construction products in African tropical timber.

Called Dryades and backed by private and public sectors, the aim is to improve products’ commercial prospects in an international market increasingly focused on environmental impact and performance.

The initiative is being funded by the PPECF-COMIFAC programme, which backs forest certification in the Congo Basin, and ATIBT members Pallisco, Precious Woods, CIB-Olam, IFO-Interholco and French timber trade federation Le Commerce du Bois.

ATIBT General Manager Benoît Jobbé-Duval said Dryades had been prompted by growing government requirement across Europe for evidence of construction products' environmental credentials.

"In the particular case of France, when building product marketing includes environmental performance communication, manufacturers are required to issue an EPD. This gives the product's complete environmental profile, based principally on life cycle analysis (LCA)," said Mr Jobbé-Duval.

He added that, under France's new environmental regulation RE2020, part of its strategy to 'decarbonize construction', the sector will also have to detail the environmental impact of new buildings throughout their life and present the data in FDESs.

"Likewise, at European level, as part of the strengthening of the Construction Products Regulation (CPR), the European Commission has drawn up a draft delegated act to make environmental declarations compulsory within the framework of the CE (European quality assurance) marking of construction products," said Mr Jobbé-Duval.

The aim of Dryades is to help suppliers in Cameroon, Gabon and Republic of the Congo put a range of construction products through LCA, including flooring, windows, doors and other joinery, leading to generation of EPDs and FDESs.

The arrangement is yet to be finalised, but it is hoped that it will also be able to draw on the tropical timber LCA expertise and experience of Netherlands timber market development operation Centrum Hout – a potential collaboration discussed at the 2019 STTC annual conference.

The project is set to get underway later this year and to deliver its first EPDs and FDESs by June 2021. "Even if it starts for the French market and there are small differences between European regulations, we'd ultimately like Dryades to cover the needs of construction at European level," said Mr Jobbé-Duval. "Beyond LCB, a contribution from European federations is possible to extend the benefits of the project to other countries."

ATIBT urges EU to step up efforts to tackle rise in illegal wood imports

The ATIBT is urging government and trade in Europe to step up efforts to tackle an increase in illegal timber imports. Currently, it maintains, the EU Competent Authorities (CAs) with responsibility for monitoring and policing imports are under-resourced and lack knowledge of the trade.

In its call to action, ATIBT takes a new stand against the illegal timber trade, the organisation says that 'import of illegal wood into Europe is suddenly making a comeback'. "This is causing serious damage to an industry that has been striving for two decades to make progress towards sustainable management and promotion of legal and certified timber," it says. "We need to be careful, because we're witnessing a step backwards that is endangering our sector."

The ATIBT maintains that those involved in the illegal trade are widely known and said that its marketing commission highlighted the need for a crackdown two years ago in 2019. "But to date, there is nothing to indicate that measures are being taken at the European authority level to stop the actions of companies that we all know," it says. "In particular we need to work more closely with customs and ports and raise their awareness regarding this menace."

The EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) is described as a key tool in the fight against the illegal trade. But the ATIBT maintains that enforcement is not sufficient to 'counter the excesses of some of these players, which operate illegally with impunity'.

“The EUTR monitoring system does not work due to lack of resources and knowledge about our sector,” states ATIBT. The illegal trade, it adds, causes deforestation and forest degradation and constitutes unfair competition for certified logging companies. It also damages the market image of the trade as a whole.

The ATIBT says that it and timber trade federations ‘cannot act beyond our prerogatives’ and create a ‘black list’ of those involved in the illegal trade. It constitutes large-scale organised crime and is thus the responsibility of the EU and Interpol. However, it says that the legitimate trade can play a role by expressing its views on the issue and only buying legally and/or sustainably certified timber.

“It is through certification systems that imports will be 100% reliable and ensure the future of our profession,” states ATIBT.

ATIBT calls on European CAs to strengthen monitoring and to target known illegal timber importers. “We all know the fight against illegality is an effective way to reduce deforestation,” it states. “Even if this trade affects only a small share of imports, it needs to be eradicated.”