



Japanese sumo wrestler Mai-No-Umi on a forestry tour near Powell River. He's promoting B.C. hemlock in Japan.

Sumo wrestler helps promote coastal B.C. hemlock in Japan

LUMBER EXPORTS | 'We are trying to brand coastal lumber as strong. We are using Mai-No-Umi's image as a small, strong guy'

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With a little help from a Japanese strongman, coastal British Columbia hemlock producers hope to win back customers who have drifted away to other products.

Mai-No-Umi, a celebrity in Japan with a reputation for being the underdog who comes out on top, was in B.C. this week with an entourage of trade journalists marketing coastal hemlock. Like the relatively pint-sized wrestler — he's only five foot six and 230 pounds — B.C. producers are hoping customers will make the link that just like the tough sumo wrestler, their wood is a high-performer too.

"We are trying to brand coastal lumber as strong. We are using Mai-No-Umi's image and reputation as a small strong guy who battles the big goliath to enhance the brand," said Rick Jeffery, president of the 26-member Coast Forest Products Association.

If branding a piece of lum-

ber seems unusual, it's only part of the length coastal producers are going to win back market share in Japan.

Coastal producers once had a large chunk of the Japanese market which they lost to more technologically advanced products. The sumo wrestler is part of a three-pronged strategy to win it back:

- Gain increased access to the Japanese market by encouraging construction and fire code changes that permit more wood use. Coast Forest recently worked with Japanese officials to change fire code regulations permitting wood use in denser population areas like Tokyo.

- Develop new products, primarily by kiln drying more lumber.

- Promote it in a way that resonates with the Japanese. Hemlock in Japan has been branded Canada 'Tsuga, using the Latin name for hemlock. Mai-No-Umi is the Canada Tsuga ambassador.

The decline of hemlock, which accounts for 60 per cent of the coastal forest,

began with the 1995 Kobe earthquake. It led to new building codes that favoured engineered wood over the big green hemlock timbers, called Japanese baby squares, that had been an integral feature of traditional post-and-beam housing.

In the late 1990s, aided by favourable currency rates, European producers moved into the market in a big way, further replacing B.C. green hemlock with engineered wood that didn't shrink as it dried.

"From 1999 to 2003, our share of the market declined," said Jeffery. In 2004 we started to see the fruits of our labour in terms of the promotion we had been doing. And we had some victories on the market access side."

Sales have flattened out in 2005, something Jeffery attributes to an inventory build-up in Japan. Industry observer Laurie Cater, publisher of *Madison's Canadian Lumber Reporter*, is more blunt. He says if inventory is building up on the wharves of Japan, it's because enough of the product is still not selling despite low prices.

Cater says marketing green hemlock not only in Japan but anywhere in the world is a tough sell these days. There are too many kiln-dried alter-

natives that customers are switching to. The only other market, the eastern U.S. seaboard, has fallen off as well as customers turn to imported European kiln-dried lumber. Cater noted when B.C. producers kiln-dry their dimension lumber — an easier task than kiln-drying the large posts and beams made from old-growth logs — the product looks good and sells easily.

There have been advances in kiln-drying technology, Cater said, but cost is a critical factor. If producers here can successfully kiln-dry more lumber for the Japanese market, it still has to be sold at a competitive price.

Jeffery said coastal producers are investing in new technology to dry hemlock, which varies in moisture content, making it more susceptible to cracking and warping.

He said five years ago, there was no kiln-dried coastal hemlock being sold in Japan.

"It had grown to 19 per cent by last year and this year we will be up to 23 per cent."

He said coastal producers are working on a new kiln-dried product which will be launched in the Japanese market this September that he expects will boost the percent even higher.

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