



Canadian larch is in no way inferior to its Siberian counterpart © Holz-Henkel

HOLZ-HENKEL

Three Canadian alternatives to Siberian larch Timber Trade Company of the Year 2025

Article by Gerd Ebner (translated by Eva Guzely) | 11.12.2024 - 10:14

“The entire European timber industry should be grateful to Holz-Henkel for its efforts to find a suitable replacement for Siberian larch.” When a market participant says that, there must be something behind it. Not least because of this accomplishment, the Holzkurier’s editorial team has chosen Holz-Henkel, Göttingen/DE, as Timber Trade Company of the Year 2025.



Customers check whether the grades and appearance are right © Holz-Henkel

With its appearance and properties, Siberian larch has become incredibly popular over the decades, especially in Germany. Half of the annual 800,000 m³ sold in Europe were needed there. However, the sanctions against Russia put an end to this. Now, the last remaining stocks are nearly used up.

Long-term development of a suitable substitute

Already in 2022, Holz-Henkel started looking for alternatives. “We knew that there are suitable types of wood in Canada but those were never available in the dimensions, volumes and grades we needed. That was our starting point,” Managing Director Torsten Herzel says, recalling the beginning.

Now, almost two and a half years later, Tolko – one of Holz-Henkel's main suppliers – pre-sorts the logs in the forest. "On the logs, it says 'GER' for Germany. Those are straight, almost flawless logs for sawing in our mills," Herzel tells us. Anyone who knows the North American market knows what a break with tradition this has been. Usually, the log wood is only roughly sorted in the sawmill according to wood species groups and then cut into Anglo-American dimensions.

It took a dozen transatlantic visits and return visits to ensure that the goods met European expectations in terms of sorting, quality, dimensions, volumes and, of course, prices.

More added value for Canadians

"We pay our suppliers several times the usual Canadian price for these goods. In return, we expect reliable deliveries. The sawmills over there are now ready to deliver everything correctly," Herzel says with satisfaction.

Holz-Henkel focuses in particular on Canadian Douglas fir from the dry belt in British Columbia and on Canadian larch. "The geographical location 'dry belt' alone is too unspecific, though. The log wood is already inspected in the forests to make sure it meets the requirements."

Enough for everyone, but few have workflows under control

According to Herzel, there is enough suitable log wood in Canada to supply the whole of Germany with Rocky Mountain/common Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *glauca*), Canadian larch and some Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) with sound knots.

"We are no longer the only ones who have Canadian wood in their product range. However, we have been there from the beginning, and we are the only ones who have developed a functioning program with our suppliers that meets the requirements of the European market," Herzel says confidently after almost 20 months of business contacts. "We would never have gotten this far without the trust placed in us and the willingness of our three main partners, Kalesnikoff, Tolko and Triad, to throw their tried-and-tested production habits overboard and try out something new with us. We give our suppliers a guarantee: Whatever you cut, we will buy all of it. This applies to all dimensions and qualities ordered. This large and wide purchasing volume is a huge advantage." Herzel puts the realistic import volume from Canada at 120,000 m³ a year.

” ***It’s never easy to break habits. Siberian larch was always popular. We simply offered it and it fit. Now, we have two or three types of wood which are at least equally as good depending on the intended use.***

Torsten Herzel

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Traders have to convince end customers



Torsten Herzel © Holz-Henkel

According to Herzel, the processing and trade companies purchasing the Canadian wood understand its advantages – but end customers often still want Siberian larch. That is over now. “There is nothing left for 2025. Customers will have to decide now what they want for the spring,” he predicts.

“We also have huge planing capacities. We have seen for ourselves how well Douglas fir can be planed and how little rejects there are,” Herzel emphasizes. Once Douglas fir wood has been dried, it hardly absorbs any water at all, which is a huge asset in outdoor use. “That’s a bonus on top of its other great properties.” The strength classes are also “excellent – we know that from preliminary reports from Holzforschung Austria.”

By now, there are at least seven to eight substitutes for Siberian larch. “Thermally treated wood is in short supply and is mainly used for façades and hardly ever for construction. Pressure impregnation is frowned upon, and domestic larch and Douglas fir are far too scarce and often of insufficient quality,” Herzel says, listing further reasons for using the three North American types of wood.

Huge trading volume

Holz-Henkel generates 50% of its turnover in timber trade. The other half is generated, among other things, as a producer of planed timber. In Göttingen/DE, the dedicated member of the VEH (Association of the European Planing Industry) processes around 120,000 m³ of lumber a year into façade and terrace products, profiled goods or solid wood floorboards on five planing lines and in a two-shift operation. The company has been part of the Cordes Group since 2002, which has logistical advantages. For example, on the company premises in Bremerhaven/DE, the company has a large

warehouse right on the pier. Logistics is therefore never the limiting factor. An individual company would find it difficult to handle such huge volumes without a large parent company, Herzel says, referring to a trading volume of around 150,000 m³ a year.

“Customers in the timber trade and wood processing sectors really appreciate the fact that we have all the types of wood in the ranges they want in stock. They place the order and within a week, they receive planed Canadian Douglas fir and larch, for example, but also thermally treated spruce and pine lumber, and other types of Scandinavian wood. We have everything,” Herzel says. Typical buyers of planed timber include timber trade companies in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic, among others, as well as well-known DIY store chains.

From the very beginning, numerous well-known planing mills in Germany and Austria have been regularly supplied with Canadian Douglas fir and larch. For the latter, Holz-Henkel effectively acts as an importer and delivers just in time from stock.

Holz-Henkel

Established in: 1888

Staff: 149

Total trading volume: 250,000 m³/yr

Target volume for Canada: 120,000 m³/yr

Products: lumber, planed timber, engineered wood, fuels

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