

Who's Promoting Hardwood? Profiling Efforts Aimed at Reversing the Industry's Decline

By Michael Connolly

The North American hardwood industry is an industry in crisis. Eastern US hardwood sawmill production has fallen by 67% from its peak of 12.62 billion board feet (BBF) in 1999 to a record low of 4.13 BBF in 2025, according to HMR/Fastmarkets estimates.

Several factors have led to this decline, namely the rise in popularity of cheaper substitute products, such as luxury vinyl tile (LVT) flooring; a slowdown in US housing starts relative to historic levels since the 2008 financial crisis; and recently, a surge of Vietnamese mills sawing lumber out of logs imported from the US, which is then undercutting US-produced lumber in export markets and domestically.

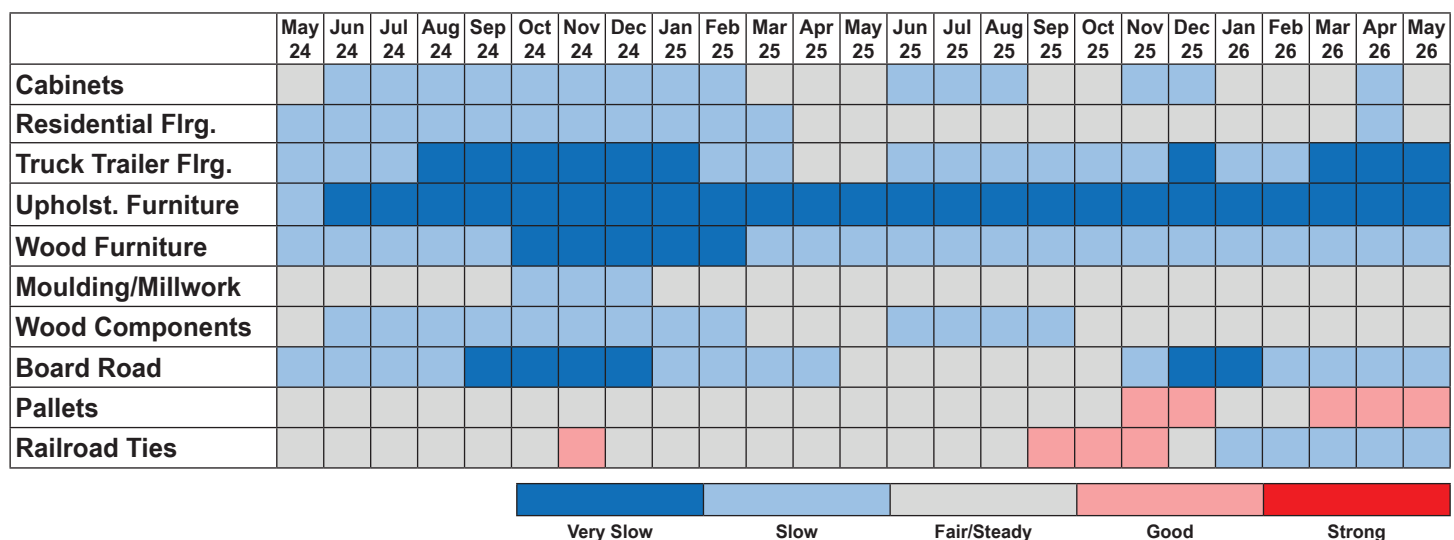
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- Real average hourly earnings for all US employees in April were down 0.5% from the prior month and 0.3% from April 2025.
- The ISM® Manufacturing PMI® climbed 1.3% in May over April to a 48-month high of 54.0%.
- The US recorded a \$60.3B trade deficit in March, with exports totaling \$320.9B compared with imports of \$381.2B.
- US manufacturing capacity utilization edged up from 75.4% (revised) in March to 75.8% in April. The April 2025 reading was 75.6%.
- The US Consumer Price Index (CPI-U) rose 0.6% (seasonally adjusted) in April on the heels of a 0.9% jump in March. For the 12 months ending in April, CPI increased 3.8%.
- In May, China's Purchasing Managers' Index slid 0.3% to 50.0%—exactly the threshold between expansion and contraction in manufacturing.

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HMR DEMAND INDEX (HDI)



These problems have spurred numerous promotional efforts across the industry in recent years, something that has traditionally been a struggle. “[The industry] has an incredible story to tell when it comes to sustainability, biophilic design, the biodegradable aspect of hardwoods, all the really positive things that come from using natural products,” Tom Coble of Hartzell Hardwoods said. “I think historically, we’ve just done a terrible job of [telling that story].”

Coble believes one of the main reasons for the industry’s difficulty promoting itself is because hardwood companies are generally small, family-owned businesses, which makes it difficult to bring them all together to support unified promotion. Industry members who spoke to HMR/Fastmarkets all stressed the importance of collaboration in order to support the industry.

“We’ve lost countless jobs and countless mills in rural communities,” Coble said. “We’re kind of behind the eight-ball, but we have to do something to change the narrative around hardwoods.”

A Pivot Toward Design Professionals

The Real American Hardwood Coalition (RAHC) is a good recent example of the industry coming together to promote itself. Formed in 2019, the coalition is made up of around 30 hardwood associations, representing more than 2,100 companies.

The RAHC’s most recent promotional strategy is an expansion toward marketing directly to design professionals, according to Dallin Brooks, chairman of the RAHC board. First efforts to reach design professionals began last year, with the help of funding from a US Forest Service grant to the National Hardwood Lumber Association (NHLA), of which Brooks is the executive director.

“We’ve created several publications, species guides, other handouts for design professionals, exhibited at trade shows, all under the RAHC brand,” Brooks said.

During the spring, the NHLA applied for two \$500,000 grants from the Forest Service, both of which are still pending approval. One grant is intended to be used to further the RAHC’s new designer-focused strategy, while the other would provide the NHLA with funding for its ongoing efforts. Answers on the grant applications are expected in August.

In marketing directly to design professionals, rather than consumers, the RAHC is replicating a softwood industry initiative called “WoodWorks.” WoodWorks is a non-profit, founded in 2012 and funded by the Softwood Lumber Board. It provides technical support, education, and resources to designers and construction teams to increase the use of softwoods in projects.

“Influencing and educating those architects and designers is crucial for our industry,” said Coble, who also serves on the NHLA board. “That’s where we can really make some ground up with these substitute products.”

Finding New Markets for Hardwoods

Chad Niman, primary forest products specialist at the University of Kentucky (UK), is working to promote the hardwood industry through his grants and research, which focus on finding new markets for hardwood lumber as well as process innovations.

Through the UK’s Robinson Wood Utilization Center, Niman is working with the UK College of Engineering to use hardwood cross-laminated timber (CLT) panels made from Yellow Poplar—Kentucky’s state tree—in structural building projects, a space where hardwoods aren’t typically utilized. CLT panels have a high strength-to-weight ratio and have gained popularity in recent years as a lightweight alternative to steel and concrete. Last fall, a grant was approved to build a new Robinson Center building using locally sourced hardwoods and hardwood CLT panels.

In his work with engineering, architecture, and



High school students tour Powell Valley Millwork as part of the University of Kentucky's weeklong Kentucky ForestryWorks Field Course. (Credit: University of Kentucky)

design students, Niman said he has noticed an aversion to using wood because of the erroneous idea that all logging is bad for the environment. "A lot of these design schools aren't up to date on the latest forest science," Niman said. This underscores the need for the RAHC's strategy to try to educate and influence architects and designers.

The Robinson Center and Niman are also researching air-drying processes, the optimization of kiln drying schedules, and the uniformity of moisture content and recovery of White Oak during the barrel stave drying process. Niman has also received grant money to research further market development of hardwood CLT panels in Kentucky. Last August, he completed research on the economics of producing structural lumber from cants.

Ultimately, Niman believes a thriving hardwood industry is necessary for maintaining forest

health because if you have markets to put lumber into, then it incentivizes logging and proper forest management. This helps prevent forests from becoming unmanageable and overcrowded with unhealthy or dead trees.

More Than a Century of Promotion

One longstanding hardwood industry promotional organization is the Indiana Hardwood Lumbermen's Association (IHLA), which was founded in 1899.

Ray Moistner, IHLA executive director, joined the organization in 1999. Lobbying has been among IHLA's foremost activities under Moistner. These efforts have led to several legislative changes in Indiana, such as the implementation of "one of the nation's strongest" right to practice forestry acts, the exemption of logging equipment from gross sales tax, and the classification of timber theft as a felony rather than a misdemeanor.



Middle school students visit the logging site of Generations Timber in Double Springs, AL.

The visit was part of an Alabama ForestryWorks Field Day.

(Credit: Alabama Forestry Foundation)

The IHLA also works to promote the industry through its annual convention and golf outing. And from 2022 to 2024, the group held a Hoosier Hardwood Festival with “varying levels of success,” according to Moistner.

Education and training are also a big part of the IHLA’s efforts. In tandem with Purdue University, the IHLA established Hardwood University, an annual program made up of nine events, spread throughout the year, meant to train and educate professionals in the industry.

The IHLA also offers an annual scholarship, designed for any member who wants to sponsor a student for any level of education, from a four-year degree to enrollment at the NHLA’s grading school. Youth education efforts include Wood on Wheels—a traveling, interactive exhibit meant for students in grades four through six, which has been on the road since 2020. And the IHLA’s website includes various educational resources for teachers.

“Between the live instructional classrooms and this online database of training resources available, we’re trying as hard as we can to be a one-stop shop for your educational and employee-training needs,” Moistner said.

ForestryWorks Focuses on Education

Another organization that promotes the hardwood industry through education and training is ForestryWorks, a collaborative effort between the Forest Workforce Training Institute (FWTI) and various industry partners.

Stephanie Fuller, director of promotions and economic development for FWTI, said ForestryWorks’ mission is “to create a sustainable pipeline of forest industry professionals for generations to come.”

The organization operates in 11 states and is involved in traditional recruitment and training efforts for the forest products industry, including the hardwood sector. These help meet the in-



A teacher in Mississippi reads *Sam Visits a Sawmill* to her students. (Credit: Mississippi Lumber Manufacturers Association)

dustry's short-term need of filling open positions, but successful workforce development also requires long-term efforts, Fuller said.

ForestryWorks provides educational offerings for K-12 students. One example is the *Tiny Timber Crew* children's book series, which Fuller wrote to teach K-2 students about the forest products industry. The series, which Fuller plans to expand, includes three books: *Lucy Meets a Logger*, *Travis Visits a Tree Farm*, and *Sam Visits a Sawmill*.

"It's easy for the children to understand. It's colorful and bright and fun and it rhymes," Fuller said. "And so instead of—you know, no hate to *The Lorax* at all—but instead of reading *The Lorax* and only getting part of the picture of what a working forest is and what management looks like, we can tell that full story."

Reaching children at a young age and clearing up widespread misconceptions about the environmental impacts of logging is a key first step in promoting the industry, explained Fuller. She

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Members of ForestryWorks of North Carolina set up a table at the Craven Community College Volt Center Career Fair in New Bern, NC. (Credit: North Carolina Forestry Association)

said that the *Tiny Timber Crew* was developed out of a recognition of this fact. ForestryWorks had been regularly setting up tables at career fairs for middle school students, but the students were apprehensive about talking with them because of their perception that the industry was harming the environment.

“We can’t have conversations with students about forestry careers until they’re comfortable with the idea of what forestry means and what we are doing to the environment,” Fuller said. “And so that really made us step back and think about how do we start these conversations much earlier in life.”

For high school students, ForestryWorks developed a forest worker credentialing program, which has certified around 10,000 students to date and covers various forestry topics, including career pathways in the industry. The program launched in Alabama in 2016 and has since been adopted in Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

In spring 2025, ForestryWorks launched pilot credentialing programs for sawmill and logging workers in Alabama, and the organization is currently developing programs for pulp and paper mill workers and forest rangers, according to Fuller.

“We feel that it’s really important to mold the conversation and the resources that we are utilizing based on the ages that we are reaching because we understand that workforce development is a long- and a short-term effort,” Fuller said.

Teaching Kids the “Truth About Trees”

The North American Forest Foundation (NAFF) is another promotional organization heavily focused on educating youth. One primary way it does this is through its Truth About Trees kits, which are meant for students in grades K-5.

The kits are provided at no cost to the schools that order them. They include lesson plans, educational videos, flashcards, and other classroom materials such as rulers, pencils, and a coloring book.

"We are seeing students now in college who are pursuing degrees in forestry and sustainability and biochemistry, who learned the Truth About Trees from our kits back in the day," NAFF Executive Director Allison Deford said. "So we're seeing the seeds we planted a long time ago, and they then come to fruition and we're seeing the fruits of that labor."

The NAFF has so far delivered around 4,000 kits over the past 15 to 20 years, according to Deford. However, there is a current backlog of 1,300 orders for kits for which the organization needs more funding to complete. Each kit costs around \$150 to produce, and those funds come from sponsors and donations.

One recent fundraising effort launched by the NAFF is its Canopy Club, which encourages small donors to sign up for recurring \$12 monthly donations. The NAFF is looking to onboard 300 members to the Canopy Club this year. "I think that's a challenge that I would like to try to solve this year as a small non-profit serving this industry," Deford said. "That if everybody could understand the importance of: Even if you can't give a lot, if you could just give a little bit, it has a big lasting impact."

The NAFF also educates children through its traveling Forever Forest museum exhibit, which teaches kids about sustainability, selective harvesting, transportation needs, and everyday products made from trees. Developed by the Omaha Children's Museum, the exhibit can be rented by museums for three-month periods.

For middle school and high school students, the NAFF is currently developing a digital application. The application is intended to teach students about different job opportunities in the hardwood industry. "There are so many opportunities that don't require a degree and debt," Deford said. "And you can have an amazing [career] working with a product that you can feel so good about." 



Students at Skillern Elementary in Tennessee show off their Truth About Trees kit. (Credit: NAFF)

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