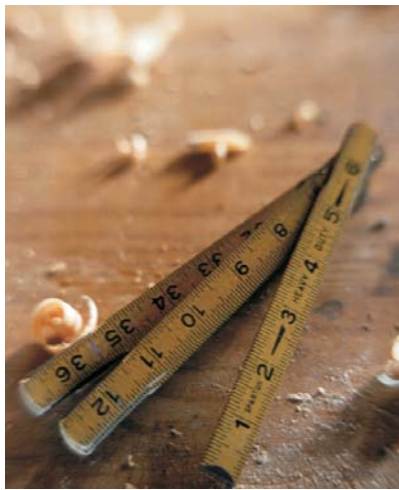
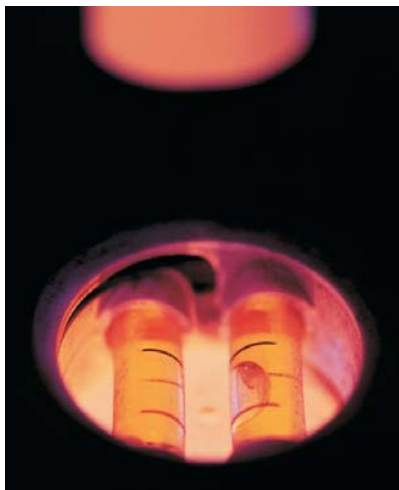


# REPRODUCTION FURNITURE: BUILT TO LAST

Far from being a burden on reproduction furniture manufacturers, the growing emphasis on sustainable development could boost competitiveness and highlight the true cost of imports, according to a new report.



***'This report is a wake-up call to manufacturers about sustainability, and we hope that it will motivate them to take a much more proactive approach.'***



Sustainable technologies could turn out to be good news for UK manufacturers of reproduction furniture, according to a report published by BFM Ltd, the trade association for British furniture manufacturers.

The BFM research shows that firms could achieve significant savings through better management of waste and reduced consumption of energy and solvents. Concerns are raised about the impact on global sustainability of imported pre-made furniture from low-cost producers in the Far East and former Eastern European countries.

The report, 'Implications of sustainable development for UK reproduction furniture manufacturers', presents the findings of a feasibility study sponsored by the Sustainable Technologies Initiative. The STI's five-year programme of collaborative research is aimed at improving the sustainability of UK business, with funding from the DTI, DEFRA and three research councils. It is supporting new ways to achieve economic growth and employment while safeguarding the environment and conserving natural resources.

Thirteen firms, with a combined turnover of £75m, took part in the study. The reproduction furniture industry as a whole is estimated to be worth about £480m a year but has been under growing pressure from imports.

'This report is a wake-up call to manufacturers about sustainability, and we hope that it will motivate them to take a much more proactive approach,' says Alistair Bromhead, environmental consultant at BFM Ltd. 'We believe that sustainable technology could provide a much-needed boost to competitiveness.'

Waste reduction could be worth as much as a 20% increase in sales, concludes the report. Many of the firms taking part use solid timbers or real wood veneers to produce high value added domestic furniture. Sixty per cent of veneers and 38% of solid timber are currently wasted, costing reproduction furniture

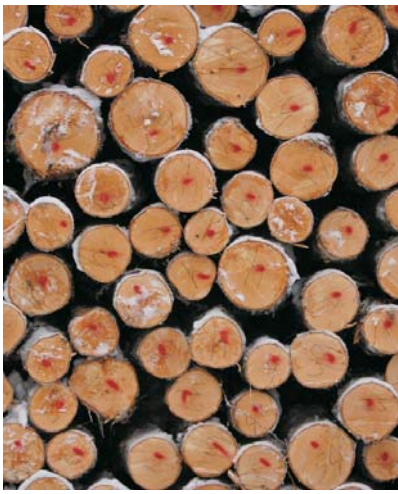
companies an estimated 5.5% of turnover. This figure could be halved by step changes in production methods.

'Reproduction furniture manufacturers are particularly intensive users of raw materials such as coatings and timber,' explains Mr Bromhead. 'This means there is likely to be greater scope for improvement than in other sub sectors of the industry. Reproduction furniture is expensive by domestic standards, so there may also be potential to benefit sales by some form of certification of sustainability.'

The study highlights how significant improvements can be made by taking sustainability into account from the outset. Sustainable design can help to avoid wastage of timber and excessive machining. When it comes to waste management, UK manufacturers could make much better use of heating from wood combustion plant by emulating European competitors.

'We see sustainable design as a particularly important topic for manufacturers to get to grips with in the next few years,' adds Mr Bromhead. 'We are encouraging companies to see how they can manufacture in a way that makes recovery of raw materials possible at the end of the furniture's life. On the positive side, reproduction furniture has a particularly long life span – 50 years plus compared with as little as three years for low quality domestic furniture designed for fashion rather than longevity.'

UK manufacturers taking part in the study have welcomed the assessment of the sustainability of imports from low-cost producers. 'Rampant' imports of pre-made furniture and components have resulted in closure of UK manufacturing plants and loss of skilled jobs. Switching manufacture to less regulated economies adds to global output of pollutants such as VOCs (volatile organic compounds). 'It is an interesting question whether UK environmental legislation is just exporting pollution to less regulated economies, with the added impact of transport emissions to bring the goods here,' comments Mr Bromhead.



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#### Contacts:

Alistair Bromhead  
Environmental Consultant, BFM Ltd  
T: 01494 450813  
E: [alistair@abromhead.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:alistair@abromhead.freeserve.co.uk)

Copies of the report 'Implications of sustainable development for UK reproduction furniture manufacturers' are available online at [www.bfmenvironment.co.uk](http://www.bfmenvironment.co.uk) or from: BFM Ltd  
30 Harcourt Street  
London W1H 2AA  
Tel: 0207 724 0851

Follow-up projects are proposed for more detailed investigation into key areas such as sustainable design and import of pre-made furniture, as well as waste management, transport, wood coatings and health and safety. More information is available on BFM's new environmental website – [www.bfmenvironment.co.uk](http://www.bfmenvironment.co.uk).

'We are certainly more optimistic about getting the industry to participate as a result of this feasibility study,' says Mr Bromhead. 'Together we can make an important contribution towards meeting the Government's sustainability targets, which would be of considerable significance from an economic, social and environmental point of view.'

### Additional project information and background

#### *How big is the UK reproduction furniture industry?*

The reproduction sub sector is thought to account for around 15% of total UK domestic furniture manufacture, representing a turnover of £480m a year. Most firms are small or medium sized enterprises (SMEs). They typically produce furniture at the top end of the market for sale in the UK, mainland Europe, the United States and Middle East.

#### *Why was reproduction furniture manufacture chosen for this feasibility study?*

Manufacturers of reproduction furniture make an important contribution to the economy and remain big employers, with a total workforce estimated at around 25,000, despite intense competition from imports.

#### *Is there a significant environmental impact?*

Annual solvent emissions by the UK furniture industry have been estimated at 10,500 tonnes and landfill at 3 million tonnes. Production methods in the reproduction sub sector are highly traditional and therefore more labour,

energy and material intensive than other parts of the furniture industry. There is more wastage because of stringent quality standards and greater use of solid timber and high quality veneers instead of MDF and chipboard.

#### *How was the study carried out?*

Fifty firms were invited to take part in the study, of which 13 provided detailed information. Data was used to compile a process flow diagram for a typical reproduction furniture manufacturer. The exercise revealed key issues that promote and hinder sustainable development.

#### *What key issues does the report highlight?*

Six priorities were identified for further investigation. They are sustainable design, import of pre-made furniture, waste management, transport, wood coatings and health and safety.

#### *How much could manufacturers save by switching to more sustainable technology?*

The bottom-line benefit could be worth as much as a 20% increase in sales. Present wastage levels are high because of stringent quality standards and the variability of raw materials. Overall it has been calculated that the furniture sector could potentially save £60m p.a. by minimising timber waste alone. Significant savings could be made in other areas such as transport and energy costs by adopting sustainable technologies.

#### *How can imports affect global sustainability?*

Many imports are sourced from countries such as China, Indonesia, Romania and Poland, where labour costs are much cheaper and regulation is far lighter than the UK. In global terms, re-locating manufacture to largely unregulated areas is likely to increase global pollution caused by materials such as VOCs, commonly used in coating processes. Significant pollution arises from transporting bulky furniture over excessively long distances.

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### SUSTAINABLE TECHNOLOGIES INITIATIVE

The STI is a programme of collaborative research aimed at improving the sustainability of UK business. The aim is to maintain high levels of economic growth and employment while protecting the environment, making better use of natural resources and working for the good of society as a whole. Companies are encouraged to work with the science base to develop and adopt new sustainable technologies.

Up to 50% of project funding is available through the LINK scheme and specific grants. Total funding worth £21m over five years is being contributed by the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and three research councils – the BBSRC (Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council), EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council) and ESRC (Economic & Social Research Council).