

I have been writing this column now for several years and have taught countless training sessions around the world with the American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC). The need for a basic understanding of the NHLA grading rules is essential in successfully utilizing hardwoods from North America. Over the past year I have received numerous questions regarding the lower grades of #2 and #3 Common. So in the interest of assisting those buyers and sellers I will try to explain these grades, what is permitted in the required cuttings, and what the level of expectation should be because when you get down to it, these grades are not pretty.

In order to fully grasp these grades, and all the NHLA grades, some standard definitions must be understood. Please go to www.nhla.com for the complete rules book.

CUTTING: A portion of the board obtained by crosscutting or ripping or by both. Note: these cuttings or measurements of both width (in inches) and length (in feet) should be parallel with the edges and the ends of the board.

CLEAR-FACE CUTTING: A cutting having one clear face (ordinary season checks are admitted) and the reverse side sound as defined in Sound Cutting. The clear face of the cutting shall be on the poor side of the board except in special grades. Note: an ordinary season check is one that will be removed in the surfacing process to the Standard Surfaced Thickness, NHLA par.14.

SOUND CUTTING: A cutting free from rot, pith, shake, and wane. It will admit sound knots, bird pecks, sapstain, season checks that will not impair the strength of the cutting, and worm holes less than ¼" (6.35mm). It will even allow ¼" and ½" (12.7mm) holes depending on the size of the cutting and if they are on one side only. Note: a sound cutting is purely for structural purpose. Think a frame on an upholstered sofa and interior parts in furniture where appearance is not an issue and the strength of the wood is all that matters.

The #2Common grade is actually a combination of two grades, #2A and #2B. When the order calls for #2Common, there is no limit of #2A or #2B required. If the buyer wants just #2A or #2B, it needs to be specified in the purchase order.

#2ACommon - This is a **clear face** cutting grade, similar to #1C and BTR. The board is required to yield **50% clear cuttings** on the poor side of the board with the better face of these cutting being sound. The other half (50%) of the board has no requirements. The NHLA grades are based on the required percentage needed for each grade, outside of the cuttings does not matter.

#2BCommon - This is a **sound cutting** grade where the only requirements is that I can measure 50% of the board using sound cuttings. This means I am allowing checks, stain, worm holes, etc in my required yield on the poor side of the board with better face of these cuttings being sound as well. So all those boards that are heavily checked, gray and weathered, and sticker marked are most probably going into this sound grade.

The #3Common grade is also divided into two grades, #3A and #3B.

The #3A Common grade is a clear-face cutting grade where 33-1/3% of the board is required to be clear from the poor side with the reverse side of these cuttings being sound. To put this into perspective, on a 10' board only a little over 3' needs to be clear. This is a grade that is suited for flooring manufacture where the board can be ripped first and then crosscut to obtain any kind of yield.

The #3B Common grade is a sound cutting grade where only 25% of the board is required to be sound on the poor face with the reverse side of these cuttings being sound as well. When you consider what a sound cutting will allow and only one-quarter of the board is required to meet this requirement, I think if you can move the board from one stack of lumber to the other without it falling apart, it will most likely make this utility grade.

I have received numerous complaints from American suppliers that their customer is claiming on these low grades. I have reinspected a lot of this material and it isn't pretty, but usually makes these lower grades. I welcome any questions you have pertaining to these lower grades and encourage you to contact the NHLA for more information.

Q. We buy mostly Basswood and Yellow Poplar and are concerned with the stickers being used when the lumber is kiln dried. The suppliers seem to be using a stick that has raised, diagonal lines running in intervals the length of the sticker, which in turn is leaving grooves in our lumber. Are these defects?

A. These "detailed" stickers were invented to reduce the contact points between the stick surface and the board, allowing more air-flow and reducing the likelihood of sapstain. In my 30 plus years of inspecting I have never encountered these tiny grooves to be a problem because they are gone as soon as we run the board through a planer. Any such irregularity on the surface of a rough sawn board can be ignored if the inspector determines that they will surface off to the standard surfaced thickness. NHLA par 14.

Please email me any questions or comments at: bshardwoods1@yahoo.com

Summary of the NHLA #2C and #3C Grades - Requirements are from the Poor Face:

#2ACOM: 50% Clear Cuttings

#2BCOM: 50% Sound Cuttings

#3ACOM: 33-1/3% Clear Cuttings

#3BCOM: 25% Sound Cuttings

Clear cuttings must be free from any defects.

Sound cuttings will allow defects that do not impair the strength of the wood.

- END -