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NWFA Launches

ENGINEERED WOOD FLOORING Refinishable Program

There is no doubt that multi-attribute certifications and tools have found a permanent home in today's marketplace. It is often necessary to develop very comprehensive systems for evaluating building products in order to gain a broad understanding of their effect on the environment, our health, and society. The wood flooring life cycle analysis (LCA) and environmental product declarations (EPD) highlighted in the sustainability article beginning on page 36 of this issue are excellent examples of this.

By John Forbes

There are times, however, when it is necessary to bring attention to a single attribute and push all others aside. The ability to refinish a wood floor, allowing it to last for generations, is one of those attributes. In fact, it is the foundational attribute that has traditionally separated wood floors from all other flooring types. The lines between hard surface categories have become increasingly blurred, and many end-users don't even know that refinishing an engineered (or solid) wood floor is an option.

The NWFA is launching the NWFA Engineered Wood Flooring Refinishable Program. The program is a voluntary certification program designed to identify engineered wood flooring products with wear layers thick enough to be refinished, and produce a list of certified refinishable wood flooring products to aid manufacturers, distributors, specifiers, and end-users in their decision-making processes. The program's definition of "refinish" is consistent with NWFA's published definition: "sanding a previously finished floor to bare wood and applying new stain or finish."

The ability to refinish a wood floor not only makes it a multi-generational product, but it also ensures it will never go out of style. The color and sheen can be updated during the remodeling process or to suit the taste of a new homeowner, providing a completely new look. Regardless of the reason for refinishing a wood floor, a recent report conducted by IVL, the Swedish Environmental Research Institute, concluded that it is more sustainable to extend the life of a wood floor through the refinishing process than it is to tear it up and replace it.

The launch of this program is timely, as the hard surface marketplace is fraught with confusion. If you walk into a flooring retail store, it seems about 80 percent of all hard surface flooring products have a wood look. Multi-layered constructions and improved visuals are making it increasingly difficult to tell one product from another, and the marketing language and images don't help. The word "wood," and pictures of real wood, are being used more loosely than ever on non-wood product displays to illicit that warm feeling that we naturally get from real wood products. This program is a simple tool designed to help the retail sales associate and buyer cut through the clutter and identify refinishable real wood flooring products that will withstand the test of time and add value to a home.

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All types of engineered wood flooring products are eligible to apply to carry the engineered wood flooring refinishable logo. To qualify, products will be evaluated to ensure they meet the following minimum wear layer thickness requirements:

- Unfinished Smooth Wood Flooring: 3.2 mm (4/32")
- Factory Finished Smooth Wood Flooring: 2.5 mm (3/32")
- Sculpted/Distressed Wood Flooring: 2.5 mm (3/32") at the lowest point

The rationale for choosing these minimum wear layer thickness benchmarks is well-supported. When addressing the sanding process for previously finished floors, the NWFA Wood Flooring Sand and Finish Guidelines state that, in general, if the wear thickness is less than 3/32", the floor should not be sanded. And, for the sanding of distressed/sculpted floors, recognizing the variation in the surface wear layer thickness of these products, the Guidelines state that the wear layer may be less than the recommended 3/32" thickness in many areas of the floor, which would become the lowest point that the remaining floor would need to be sanded to in order to get it flat.

For additional information about the sanding process, check out the NWFA's Wood Flooring Sand and Finish Guidelines at NWFA.ORG/TECHNICAL-GUIDELINES/.

UNFINISHED ENGINEERED BENCHMARK PROCESS

4/32" Wear Layer
on Newly Installed Unfinished Floor

1/32"+/- Wear Layer
Removed During Initial Sand & Finish

3/32"+/- Wear Layer
Remaining. Equal to Factory Finished Benchmark.

Determining the wear layer thickness benchmark for unfinished engineered wood flooring involves a little math, but not much. NOFMA guidelines clearly stated prior to its merger with NWFA that the sanding operation should remove a minimal amount of wood, less than 1/32". If you remove approximately 1/32" of wood from the wear layer of an installed unfinished engineered wood floor with a 4/32" wear layer, the result is a site-finished floor with a wear layer approximately 3/32" thick. This newly finished floor now has a "refinishable" wear layer comparable to a newly installed factory finished floor. The 4/32" wear layer benchmark is further supported in that standardized detail drawings for the thinnest solid unfinished wood floors (3/8") dating back as far as 1916 have 4/32" wear layers, which allowed the resulting wood flooring product to be sanded and finished on site, and refinished at least once at a future date.

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For those of you who consulted a conversion chart, you may have noticed that 3/32" actually equals 2.381 mm. It is true that rounding 2.381 mm to 2.5 mm makes it easier to communicate, but that's not the primary reason for the rounding. The European Federation of the Parquet Industry (FEP) unites Europe's parquet manufacturers, associations, and suppliers. The European wood flooring category faces the same hard surface market challenges as North America. In order to safeguard the quality image of parquet, as well as push back against the myriad of look-alike products, FEP developed its definition of parquet around wood flooring's ability to be refinished. Therefore, for the last 20 years, a wood flooring product can only be called "parquet" in Europe if its real wood top layer is at least 2.5 mm thick. In order to encourage an international norm, NWFA has aligned its refinishability benchmark with FEP's definition of parquet, and has developed a compliance path in which FEP-certified refinishable parquet products from Europe can be cross-certified within the NWFA Refinishable Program.

This standard has been implemented in an effort to alleviate the blurred lines between hard surface categories, and to help the consumer understand the value of their real wood floor investment.

As you visit your local retail stores this fall, be on the lookout for the early adopters of the NWFA Certified Refinishable Logo. ■

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