WUI Code Compliance with Fire-Retardant-Treated Wood

Dr. Dave Bueche - Director of Fire & Life Safety Codes
Hoover Treated Wood Products

As human development expands into fire-prone natural landscapes, the wildland–urban interface (WUI) becomes increasingly vulnerable to wildfire destruction. The WUI is the zone where homes, communities, and infrastructure intermingle with wildland fuels such as forests, shrubs, and grasslands. According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), millions of homes in thousands of U.S. communities lie within the WUI, making them potentially vulnerable to wildfire exposure.

In such settings, embers, radiant heat, and direct flame contact pose serious risks to structures. To mitigate these risks, fire science and building codes have increasingly emphasized the importance of ignition-resistant construction, including the use of specialized materials such as fire-retardant-treated wood (FRTW).

Fire Behavior in the WUI

Wildfires in the WUI present unique challenges compared to purely structural or wildland fires. Key hazards include:

- **Ember exposure:** Burning embers (firebrands) can be carried by wind over long distances and ignite structures well ahead of the main fire front.
- **Radiant heat:** Structures may be exposed to high levels of thermal radiation without direct flame contact.
- **Direct flame contact:** Nearby vegetation or burning structures can ignite a building or other structure through direct flames.

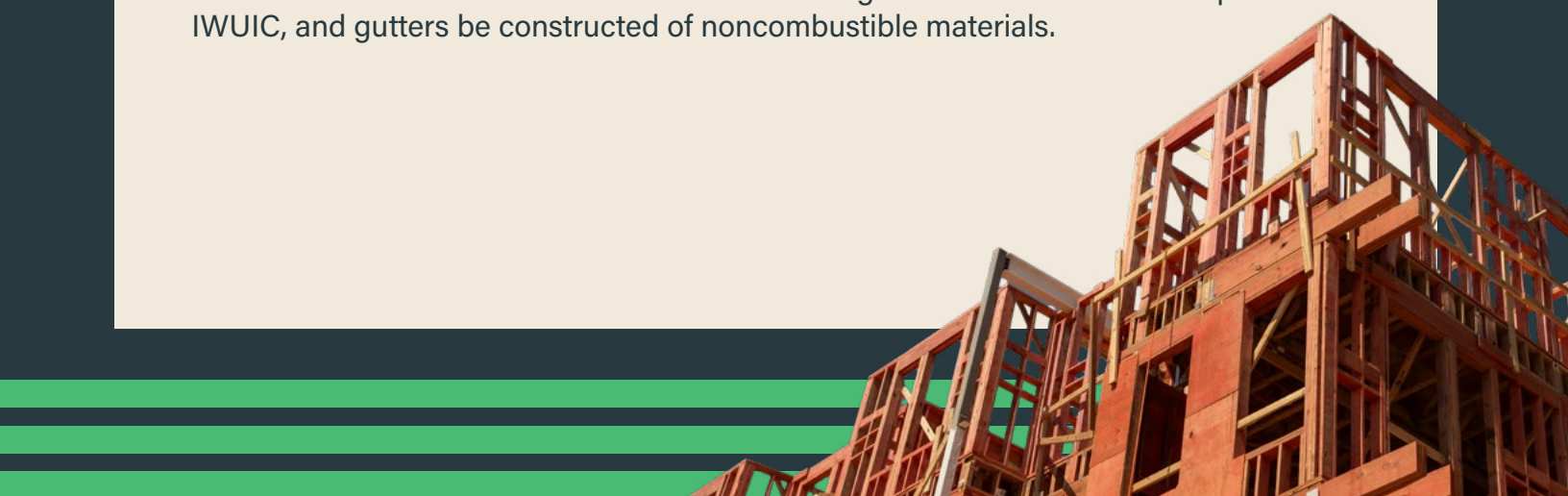
Moreover, building materials themselves constitute a significant portion of the combustible mass in WUI fires. Wood products (structural framing, sheathing, siding) account for a large portion of energy content in building combustibles. Given these threats, reducing the ignition potential of buildings is critical to enhancing community resilience.

Regulatory Framework

To address the specific risks of WUI fires, model building codes have evolved. The International Wildland-Urban Interface Code (IWUIC) provides prescriptive and performance-based standards designed to ensure that structures can better resist ember ignition, flame contact, and radiant heat.

Under the IWUIC, ignition-resistant construction encompasses various building components, such as roofs, walls, decks, and vents, and specifies acceptable materials and assemblies. For instance, eaves and soffits in Class 1 ignition-resistant construction must be protected by ignition-resistant materials or other approved materials per IWUIC § 504.3.

Many local jurisdictions adopt or adapt these model codes. For example, in Leavenworth, WA, local ordinance requires that eaves be protected by 1-inch nominal exterior fire-retardant-treated lumber or ignition-resistant materials per IWUIC, and gutters be constructed of noncombustible materials.



Types of Ignition-Resistant Materials

The IWUIC and related guidance typically recognize several categories of materials for WUI-resistant construction:

1. **Noncombustible materials:** These are materials that do not ignite and do not contribute significant combustible fuel (e.g., steel, stone, concrete, masonry).
2. **Fire-retardant-treated wood (FRTW):** Wood treated via pressure impregnation with chemicals to reduce flammability.
3. **Fire-classified roofing materials:** Roofing assemblies that achieve high durability and fire classification (e.g., Class A).

These categories offer a range of aesthetic, structural, and cost tradeoffs, allowing designers and homeowners to choose appropriate materials while complying with fire-resilient construction principles.

Fire retardant treated wood (FRTW)

Fire-retardant-treated wood (FRTW) is defined in the International Building Code (IBC) § 2303.2 as wood products impregnated with fire-retardant chemicals using a pressure process in a closed vessel at significant pressure (at least 50 psi).

This pressure treatment helps the chemicals penetrate deeply into the wood's cellular structure, which enhances durability and fire performance.

Performance and Testing Requirements

FRTW used in WUI settings must satisfy stringent performance criteria. For example, WUI-compliant FRTW must meet:

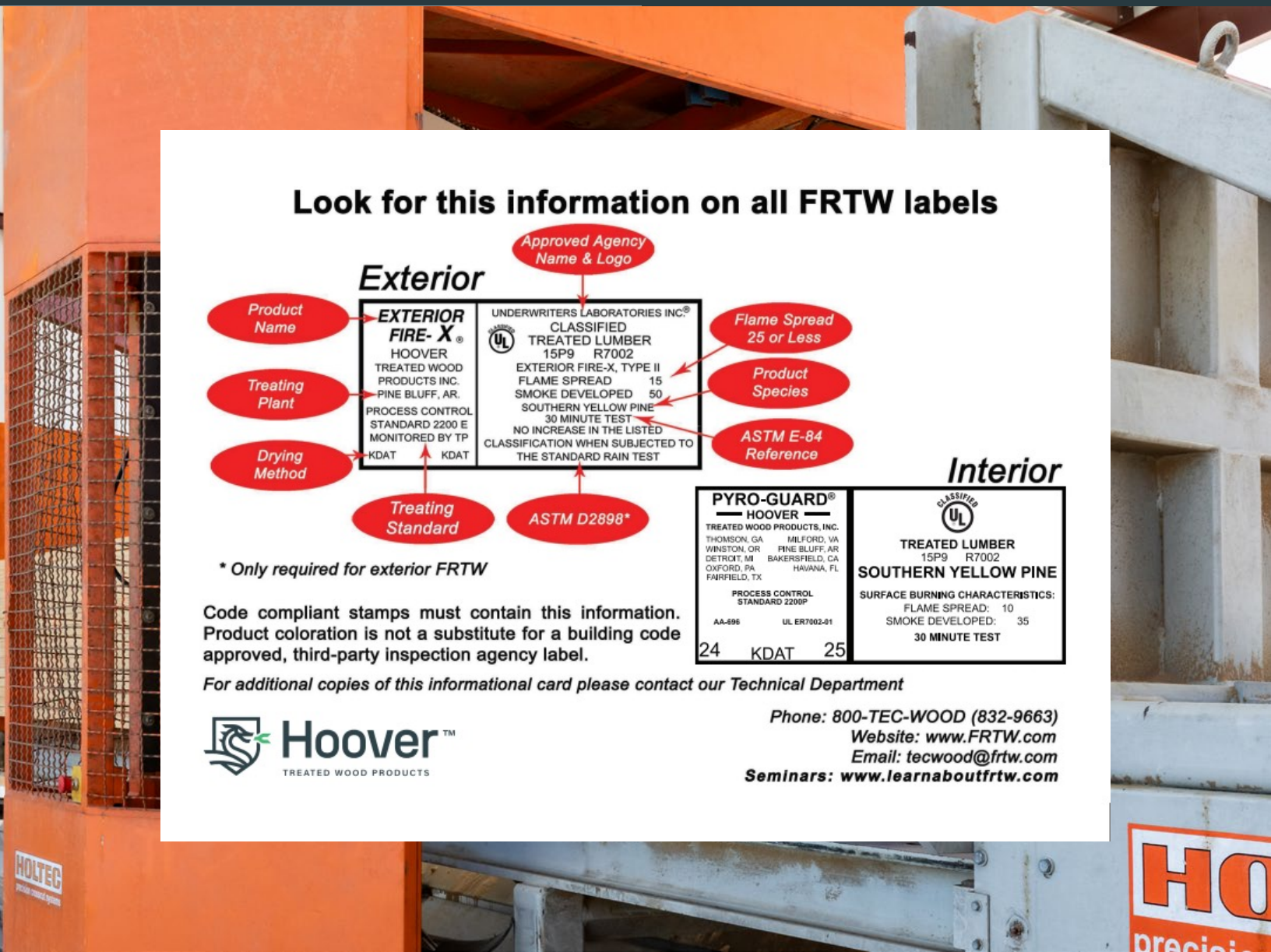
1. **Reaction to fire test (ASTM E84 / UL 723):** Extended 30-minute test (versus typical 10-minute tests) for flame spread to ensure long-duration resistance.
2. **Accelerated weathering (ASTM D2898):** Materials must be subjected to simulated weathering (e.g., repeated cycles of wetting and drying) before fire testing, to replicate real-world outdoor exposure.
3. **Moisture content:** After treatment, the fire-retardant-treated wood must be kiln-dried (KDAT) to ensure moisture stability, per code (e.g., IBC requires 15% MC for FRT plywood and 19% MC for FRT lumber).
4. **Third-party quality certification:** Products should be certified (tested, listed, and labeled) by an independent third-party agency (e.g., UL Solutions) to verify compliance with code requirements and referenced performance standards.

These rigorous requirements distinguish WUI-grade (exterior) FRTW from interior fire-retardant-treated wood used in conventional building construction applications.

Applications in WUI Construction

FRTW is commonly used for:

- **Soffits and eaves:** Unprotected eaves can be points of vulnerability; FRTW is often used to protect these areas per IWUIC eave construction requirements.
- **Decks and appendages:** Decking near structures is especially susceptible to ember ignition; FRTW decking provides a way to maintain the appearance and feel of wood while complying with the WUI codes.
- **Exterior walls and siding:** In some WUI jurisdictions, exterior walls can be built with exterior-grade FRTW labeled for both weather durability and flame spread.



Challenges in Implementation and Policy

While materials science advances, several practical and policy challenges remain in widespread adoption of ignition-resistant construction in the WUI.

1. **Code adoption and enforcement:** Even though the IWUIC provides a strong model, not all jurisdictions adopt it, and enforcement may be inconsistent.
2. **Cost barriers:** The up-front cost of ignition-resistant materials may deter homeowners, even though they can dramatically reduce risk and loss potential.
3. **Maintenance and retrofit:** Older homes may not be built to resist ember attack; retrofitting (e.g., replacing siding, decks) can be expensive and disruptive.
4. **Awareness:** Homeowners and builders may not fully understand the importance of embers and ignition pathways, focusing mainly on defensible space or fuel management.

To address these, researchers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders must collaborate to:

- Strengthen local adoption of fire resilience-focused building codes.
- Provide incentives or financial assistance for homeowners to use ignition-resistant building materials.
- Expand research and development into next-generation building materials and testing standards.
- Educate communities about structural hardening, maintenance, and defensible space.

Conclusion

Ignition-resistant materials—especially fire-retardant-treated wood—are a cornerstone of increasing structural resilience in the wildland–urban interface. By combining regulatory frameworks (like the IWUIC), rigorous performance testing, and emerging materials science, communities can better guard against the most devastating effects of wildfire: ember ignition, flame contact, and structural vulnerability.

However, material solutions alone are not enough. A holistic approach is required—one that integrates defensible space (vegetation management), community planning, and widespread adoption of fire-smart building practices. Research must continue to push the boundaries of innovative fire protection, and policymakers must ensure that such innovations translate into real-world resilience for those living at the edge of the wild.

Hoover Treated Wood Products, the fire-retardant-treated wood industry leader, has been producing fire-retardant-treated lumber and plywood since 1955. Hoover's widely recognized brands, PyroGuard™ and ExteriorFireX™, are produced in its ten industrial treating plants and are readily available through a nationwide network of stocking lumber dealers.

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