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For immediate release

Bent on commercial success

Australian furniture manufacturers are highly interested in using bent wood furniture components produced using CRC Wood Innovations technology, a recent market research survey shows.

“The survey shows there is a significant Australian market for bent wood components produced using our microwave technology,” said CRC Program Manager Barbara Ozarska, who commissioned the research. “Furniture manufacturers are very interested in replacing machine-shaped components with bent components.”

Furniture manufacturers were surveyed about use of bent components in furniture making, including the sizes, shapes and timber species used most frequently and the types of furniture they are used in. The survey was conducted by independent market researchers BFG Consulting Group and Graeme Cock and Associates, in collaboration with the Furniture Industry Association of Australia (FIAA), a participant in the CRC. More than one third of FIAA members responded to the survey.

Dr Ozarska says the survey has been valuable in assessing the market and identifying furniture manufacturing companies interested in collaborating with CRC Wood Innovations to bring the bending technology from the laboratory to the factory floor. The CRC will provide regular updates on the research to companies interested in being kept up to date about the bending technology.

“Because of the industry interest, we hope to further develop the microwave bending technology with furniture industry leaders,” said Dr Ozarska. “We anticipate constructing a prototype automated bending machine plant that could be used to supply manufacturers with bent components of different shapes.”

The survey indicates that the market is sufficient to make such a plant commercially viable. CRC Wood Innovations has commenced initial discussions with a CRC participant to locate the plant at their premises.

“Our bending research has used Australian hardwood species such as mountain ash and jarrah and the survey confirmed that these timber species are among the top four timber species used in Australian furniture manufacture,” Dr Ozarska
said. “As a result of the survey, we will extend our research to include blackwood, red gum, spotted gum and radiata pine as well.”

Dr Ozarska says she was keen to tap the extensive experience of Graeme Cock in the furniture manufacturing industry. Graeme ran his own furniture manufacturing business for 30 years, and has recently finished a nine-year term as CEO of the FIAA.

At present, curved furniture components such as chair legs, backs and arms are manufactured by cutting the wood to curved shapes (machine-shaping), or by bending laminated wood to shape. The CRC technology involves use of a microwave to heat and soften solid wood prior to bending it.

Microwave softening is very rapid and efficient in comparison with existing softening methods, such as steam and chemical softening. For example, a 25 mm thick Mountain ash stick can be softened in 1.5 minutes in the microwave unit—30 times faster than if steam were used. The microwave softening method also offers greater flexibility in the bent shapes that can be produced, enabling furniture manufacturers to explore designs based on new bent-wood shapes. It also lends itself to automated manufacture, enabling a number of identical components to be made simultaneously.

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