

Helping Housing Crisis

Oregon hopes mass timber will boost housing and jobs

(AP) — Inside a warehouse at the industrial Port of Portland lies what some believe could be the answer to Oregon's housing crisis — a prototype of an affordable housing unit made from mass timber.

Once mass-produced at the factory being planned at the port, the units ranging from 426 square feet (40 square meters) to 1,136 square feet (106 square meters) could be deployed across the state to be assembled in urban and rural communities alike, potentially alleviating a critical housing shortage that has driven Oregon's high rates of homelessness.

"I can't wait to see these homes rolling down the road to those communities who need them right now," said newly inaugurated Democratic Gov. Tina Kotek, who visited the prototypes Friday. "We have to do this day in and day out in order to meet the goals of providing enough housing for every Oregonian in this state. Because that is the long-term solution to end homelessness."

On her first full day in office earlier this month, Kotek signed an executive order setting a new housing construction target of 36,000 units per year — an 80% in-



Mass timber affordable home prototypes are shown at the Port of Portland. The Oregon Mass Timber Coalition aims to open a factory at the site that could mass produce homes and potentially alleviate the state's housing shortage. (AP Photo/Claire Rush)

crease over current production — in a bid to address the state's housing shortage.

Mass timber has yet to be widely adopted for affordable housing construction. While Oregon officials are seeking to change that, some environmental groups have expressed concern that increased logging could lead to deforestation if not managed sustainably, which could add to global warming.

Mass timber is made from layers of wood that are stacked, often in perpendicular layers, then compressed and fastened together to make large panels or beams. Already popular in Europe, where it was developed in the 1990s, mass timber is gaining ground in the U.S. The tallest mass timber building in the world, the 25-story Ascent MKE building, opened in Milwaukee last summer, surpassing Norway's 18-story Mjostarnet tower.

Proponents of mass timber say it uses less energy and emits less carbon than concrete and steel. They also claim it can help reduce wildfire risk, as the material can be made of the smaller trees in a forest's underbrush. And they point to the rural jobs the industry can create.

The Oregon Mass Timber Coalition received a \$41 million federal grant last year to help finance the construction of the housing factory at the Port of Portland. Members of the coalition, which is made up of government agencies and Oregon universities, say the factory would make it easier to produce prefabricated homes.

"The beauty of it is, you can cut the openings required for electrical and plumbing and stuff like that," said Iain MacDonald, director of the TallWood Design Institute, a member of the coalition. Producing more factory homes also would allow the state to ramp up housing despite a labor shortage that's seized the manufacturing and construction industries, MacDonald said.

The units will initially range in price from \$200,000 for a studio to about \$400,000 for a three-bedroom unit, according to Fonseca. He said that he expects prices to go down once the factory is up and running a few years from now. The median sale price of a home in Oregon was \$473,400 as of December, according to the online real estate brokerage site Redfin.

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