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Mass timber also affected by record prices, pandemic

Mass timber has been a growing market in North America, but growth has slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, various buildings using mass timber (most commonly cross-laminated timber and variations such as mass plywood panels) have been either proposed or built. Building codes are slowly being updated to allow for mass timber in taller structures, typically larger commercial buildings. However, while a shortage of homes has accelerated homebuilding, commercial building has languished. Levi Huffman, director of technical services at DR Johnson Wood Innovations, said production at the company's Oregon plant slowed last summer, when commercial projects started getting canceled due to COVID-19. "The speculative office building type of project is on hold right now," Huffman said. "It's not just because of timber or steel prices, but people are being cautious. They don't want to invest \$20 million and have no one use the building." According to a March survey by Associated General Contractors of America, 52% of contractors reported project delays or disruptions due to a shortage of construction materials or parts. Given both the sharply higher cost of wood products compared to a year ago and struggles to ramp up production, the impact has trickled down to mass timber producers. "They're both huge issues," said Tyler Freres of Freres Lumber, an Oregon plywood manufacturer and pioneer of the mass plywood panel. "That's exactly what we're struggling with. We're trying to quote mass timber competitively to get the long-term business." Huffman and Freres said mass timber producers' focus remains on the long-term picture, emphasizing advantages such as reduced construction time and stored carbon. In the meantime, however, producers are striking while the iron is hot. DR Johnson produces glulam beams which are more apt for residential construction, so that is currently the emphasis. "That's been our saving grace," Huffman said. "We're finding a market that works right now."

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