The forest products industry is one of the pillars of South Carolina’s economy, and exports make a significant contribution to the state’s income and employment, hence the importance of international promotion in growing our markets. The Central American region is experiencing increases in population, tourism and deforestation, which together are driving a greater need for imported forest products in general, and solid wood products in particular. Nevertheless, the U.S. South’s share of this market is relatively low, and work is yet to be done to develop its potential. The goal of this mission was to offer attending companies a personalized agenda of one-on-one meetings and site visits to prospective customers to create new business opportunities and learn about the market.

The South Carolina Forestry Commission conducted a trade mission to Costa Rica Feb. 11-15 with the goal of developing new markets for wood products from the state. This effort was led by SCFC Forest Products Marketing Specialist Edgar Arias and SCFC Resource Development Director Tim Adams; both were joined by two South Carolina businesses: Cameron Lumber, represented by co-owner Randy Hunt, and Green Link Industries, Inc., represented by president Ched Kearse.

February is one of the best times to travel to Costa Rica: it is still the dry season, temperatures are around 75 degrees, humidity is low, and the trade winds arrive from the northeast.

The core of the mission’s program began Tuesday morning with a workshop covering essential aspects of the Costa Rican market and doing businesses with local companies. Mr. Erick Wolff, Regional Senior Commercial Officer for the U.S. Commercial Service, provided detailed background information on the country, delved into the prospects for the building sector, listed future infrastructure projects and offered insights on opportunities and challenges in the market. Julie Morin, Regional Agricultural Attaché with USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), reviewed trends and best prospects in trade of U.S. agricultural commodities with Costa Rica and reviewed the services offered by her office to support U.S. exporters: trade policy, market development, export assistance and data analysis. Representing the National Forestry Office, Sebastian Ugalde discussed a comprehensive study of the local wood market, its opportunities and challenges for American exporters. An overview of the phytosanitary import requirements for wood products was later delivered by Magda Gonzales, executive director of the Costa Rica Phytosanitary Service.

Edgar Arias closed the event with an update on wood products exports from South Carolina.

After lunch, participating companies began business sessions with potential buyers. A selected group of builders, furniture manufacturers, building
materials companies, furniture materials suppliers and wood brokers congregated at the hotel to participate in one-on-one meetings with Mr. Hunt and Mr. Kearse, share about their companies, learn from Cameron Lumber and Green Link, and discuss their product requirements. The mission’s team then moved to El Pedregal Convention Center to attend the opening to “Expo Construcción y Vivienda 2019,” the major construction and housing trade show in the country. Following a plan of visits prepared in advance by SCFC, the team learned about the country’s housing market and future development projects and networked with exhibitors in the construction materials section.

On Thursday morning, participating companies and the SCFC team traveled west to the town of Las Juntas in the province of Guanacaste for a field trip to “Forestal Río Grande,” a teak plantation owned and managed by Dr. Luis Sage, former professor and department head of the School of Forestry at Costa Rica Tech. After arriving in Las Juntas, the team toured three of the company’s plantations, where they learned about teak and its properties, stand management practices, top markets, opportunities and roadblocks for commercialization. The mission’s program for the SCFC team included an additional field trip the next day.

On Friday morning, Adams and Arias traveled east to the province of Cartago, where Costa Rica Tech is located, to visit Dr. Olman Murillo and Mr. Diego Camacho, professors at the School of Forestry. Dr. Murillo, a graduate of North Carolina State University who leads the tree improvement program at C.R. Tech, guided a tour of their Molecular Genetics Laboratory and spent time with the SCFC comparing notes about their program (Tim Adams, also an NC State graduate, leads the commission’s own tree improvement program). Camacho, who is also an investigator for the university’s Forestry Innovation Research Center, provided instrumental support through the marketing research, planning and recruitment of buyers for the trade mission.

During the visit, he talked about the university’s efforts to promote the use of wood in construction and showcased student-developed wood housing prototypes. The group also discussed future opportunities to educate the local market on U.S. wood products.