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Investigating the Use of Small-Diameter Softwood as Guardrail Posts: Static Test Results

David E. Kretschmann Ron Faller Jason Hascall John Reid Dean Sicking John Rohde Dick Shilts Tim Nelson

Abstract

Round guardrail posts may provide an important valueadded option for small-diameter thinnings. Such posts require minimum processing and have been shown to have higher strength compared to the equivalent rectangular volume. The resulting value-added product may bring a higher return compared to lumber. The obstacles to immediate utilization of ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir guardrail posts are the need for full-scale crash testing, a visual grading rule, and an installation guide. This paper reports on the static and dynamic tests performed at the USDA Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, and the Midwest Roadside Safety Facility in Lincoln, Nebraska, to determine material properties for designing a new Midwest Guardrail System for round wood posts. Grading practices are recommended for round ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and southern yellow pine guardrail posts for the new Midwest Guardrail System.

Keywords: Round guardrail posts, small-diameter, Midwest Guardrail System, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, southern yellow pine.

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Introduction

For many years there has been ongoing discussion on ways to manage fuel and reduce fire control costs and damage on forested lands. This discussion has led to various strategies to prevent catastrophic fires by reducing fuel loadings (i.e., excess biomass), including prescribed burning, salvage timber operations, pruning, pre-commercial thinning, and mechanical or chemical release. In western forests, salvage timber operations and pre-commercial thinning reduce fuel loadings by removing small-diameter and low-valued material. Although these activities are believed by many to be an effective fire prevention technique, their cost effectiveness cannot be properly evaluated until all costs have been accurately determined. As more end uses for this traditionally underutilized wood become available, the overall operational costs will be reduced as a result of the financial and societal benefits that are generated. One potential use for forest thinnings is for the round guardrail posts that are used along highways for motorist safety (Paun and Jackson 2000). There are over 7,200 km of guardrail sold in the United States per year. This translates into more than 3.8 million posts (of some type) being used. A large volume of thinnings could be utilized if the thinned material is shown to perform adequately as guardrail posts. For a given volume of wood, round posts can provide twice the market value of rectangular posts and nine times the market value of chips. There are substantial opportunities for implementing round posts into W-beam guardrail systems throughout the United States, especially if it can be shown that several wood species can be acceptable for use in these crashworthy barrier systems.

Background

For more than 50 years, longitudinal barrier systems have been used to prevent errant motorists from colliding with

dangerous rigid hazards along highways and roadways. Although several different longitudinal barrier systems can be found throughout the United States, W-beam guardrail systems have historically been the most common. In general, W-beam guardrail systems consist of three major components: a steel W-beam rail element, evenly spaced support posts, and guardrail blockouts. Guardrail posts are manufactured from either wood or steel. For wood guardrail systems, both 152.4- by 203.2-mm rectangular and 184.1-cm-diameter round post cross sections have been successfully utilized. They are generally manufactured from No. 1 grade southern yellow pine (SYP). Wood blockouts are usually incorporated into the design to position the W-beam rail away from the sides of the posts that face traffic. The positioning of the rail forward from the posts reduces the likelihood that a vehicle will snag on the posts as well as the potential for vehicular instability and/or rollover.

In terms of material costs to the end user (e.g., state highway agencies), typical price ranges per guardrail post for steel, rectangular wood, and round wood alternatives are \$12 to \$16, \$11 to \$19, and \$11 to \$13, respectively (costs were provided by a major manufacturer of roadside safety hardware). Although an SYP round post alternative has the lowest price, implementation of round-post W-beam systems has been mostly limited to the State of Texas. Funding was gathered and cooperators solicited to initiate a project to demonstrate the feasibility of using Douglas-fir (DF) and ponderosa pine (PP) in a strong-post W-beam guardrail system (strong-post means the majority of the posts in the system are meant to withstand impact with minimal dynamic deflection).

Objectives

The following objectives were identified for our guardrail post project.

- 1. Obtain technical data that would demonstrate whether small-diameter softwoods harvested from fuel reduction projects could be used for highway guardrail applications. Investigate the use of PP and DF, with SYP as baseline material. The test variables included post size, grade, and post embedment depth.
- 2. Determine reasonable grading practices for round guardrail posts manufactured from PP, DF, and SYP.
- 3. Investigate, design, and make recommendations for the use of round wood posts, including all these species, in the Midwest Guardrail System (MGS) or in a new strong-post, W-beam guardrail system. Utilize a proven nonlinear, dynamic vehicle-to-barrier impact analysis computer simulation program.
- 4. Conduct full-scale vehicle crash tests at Test Level 3 (TL-3) according to the impact safety standards of the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) Report No. 350 (Ross and others 1993) to demonstrate the use of wood round post alternatives in longitudinal barrier systems.
- 5. At the completion of the project, prepare an installation manual and standard computer-aided design (CAD) plans for round-post highway guardrail systems using PP, DF, and SYP.

Work Plan

The work plan for this research project consists of five distinct phases. Phase I includes an initial project planning period, testing component setup and preparation, and the wood materials acquisition and grading. Phase II includes static and dynamic evaluation and determination of the structural properties of the three wood post materials when subjected to a cantilevered loading. Phase III includes a dynamic evaluation of the post-soil forces for each wood species when subjected to a cantilevered loading using varying post embedment conditions. Phase IV consists of BARRIER VII computer simulation of vehicle-to-barrier impacts for the three round post wood alternatives. This computer modeling is then used to evaluate and predict dynamic barrier performance as well as to make any necessary design modifications. Phase IV also includes the final design of the barrier system as well as the preparation of an installation manual and standard CAD plans. Phase V includes full-scale vehicle crash testing conducted according to current impact safety standards and preparation of reports to summarize work completed. Appendix A shows more details and the timeline.

This report focuses on the static testing in Phase II conducted at the USDA Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory (FPL) in Madison, Wisconsin, and also includes some data from and comparisons to the dynamic test information collected at the Midwest Roadside Safety Facility (MwRSF) in Lincoln, Nebraska. A visual grading rule for round guardrail posts developed by experts from Timber Products Inspection Graders, FPL, and MwRSF is also presented.

Sampling

Three species were sampled in Phase II of the testing project: SYP, PP, and DF. The SYP material came from the following manufacturers: Arnold Forest Products in Louisiana, Interstate Timber in Tennessee, and Burke-Parsons-Bowlby in West Virginia. All of the SYP material had been treated by the suppliers to ground a contact retention level of 0.5 lb/ft3 with chromated copper arsenate (CCA). The PP material was obtained from Hill Products Group and the posts came from both Wyoming and South Dakota. These posts were treated by Hill Products Group with CCA to a retention level of 0.5 lb/ft3. The DF material was from two different suppliers in Oregon: Rouge Valley Fuels and Goshen Forest Products. The DF material was treated with ammoniacal copper quat type B (ACQ-B) by All-weather Wood Products or J. H. Baxter & Co. to retention levels greater than 0.5 lb/ft3.

The test matrix for the Phase II cantilever tests is shown in Table 1. There were two rounds of testing in Phase II that were meant to provide test information to bracket the appropriate diameter for the final guardrail system design. For this research effort, it was planned that each species contain a sample of 75 pieces in order to contain a wide range of knot sizes and growth rings. To ensure proper amounts of each category, Timber Product Inspection grading supervisors assisted in identifying posts with the required diameter knots and rings per inch $(1 \text{ in.} = 25.4 \text{ mm})$ (hereafter referred to as rpi). The study was set up so that both static and dynamic tests would be performed on three knot-ring combinations (BKN LRD, SKN LRD, and SKN HRD). There were two types of knots, which varied depending on species: big (BKN) and small (SKN). There were two categories of rpi: low (LRD = \leq 4 rpi) and high (HRD = \geq 6 rpi). The three combinations were tested both statically and dynamically. Further, tests of a larger sample more representative of the expected global post population was also tested statically.

For each round of testing, 10 posts for each species and knot–ring category were identified to have the appropriate knot–ring combinations. An additional 45 posts were collected from the larger population of posts for static testing. At FPL, 360 static tests were planned; at MwRSF, 90 total dynamic post tests were planned.

After the samples were delivered to FPL, the knots for each post were mapped in more detail and a more rigorous measurement of rpi and percent latewood were determined from digital photographs of the ends of the posts. Appendix B contains an example data sheet for knot mapping. Each post was weighed and measured. Longitudinal stress wave modulus of elasticity (SWMOE) was determined. The posts were sorted by SWMOE and then randomly assigned to either dynamic or static testing. In Round 2 of the DF sample, five

			Round 1						Round 2				
		DF		PP		SYP		DF		PP		SYP	
		184-mm		216 -mm		$190 - mm$		$178 - mm$		$190-mm$		$171 - mm$	
Variable ^b	ST	DY	ST	DY	ST	DY	ST	DY	ST	DY	ST	DY	Total
BKN LRD	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	60
SKN LRD	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	60
SKN HRD	5	5	5.	5	5	5	5.	5	5	5	5.	5	60
Population	45		45		45		45		45		45		270
Total tests	60	15	60	15	60	15	60	15	60	15	60	15	450

Table 1—Number of static (ST) and dynamic (DY) tests in Rounds 1 and 2 of the Phase II cantilever beam tests ^a

a Static tests were conducted at FPL, dynamic tests at MwRSF. DF, Douglas-fir; PP, ponderosa pine; SYP, southern yellow pine.

 b BKN, big knot; SKN, small knot; LRD, \leq 4 rpi; HRD, \geq 6 rpi; Population, random mixture of posts.

Figure 1—Posts soaking in water before testing.

posts originally picked to be tested statically were sent to Lincoln for soil embedment testing; therefore only 40 tests of the population were conducted for Round 2 of the DF.

The static and dynamic material was stored in water tanks until testing to simulate the most severe environmental condition of being placed in wet soil (Fig. 1). As a result, the portion of the post that was to be below the ground was above the fiber saturation point and the groundline moisture conditions were typically in a range of 20% to 50% moisture content (MC) at time of test.

Test Methods

The static cantilever post tests were conducted using a 1-million-lb (4,448.2-kN) test frame at FPL (Fig. 2a), with a loading rate of 0.0085 m/min (0.33 in/min). Loads were recorded on a 222.4-kN (50,000-lb) load cell in Round 1 testing and a 111.2-kN (25,000-lb) load cell in Round 2. Deflections were recorded using three linear variable differential transformers (LVDTs). One LVDT was located under the concentrated load, one located at the groundline, and one located at the bottom of the post (Fig. 3). The maximum load, modulus of rupture (MOR), and time to failure were determined.

Dynamic cantilevered post tests were conducted at MwRSF using a 7.1-kN (1,605-lb) rigid-frame "bogie" (wheels mounted on a rigid steel frame) vehicle (Fig. 2b). A more complete description of the Phase II dynamic tests can be found in Hascall's thesis (Hascall 2005). In these tests, the bogie traveled at approximately 32 km/h (20 mi/h) in Round 1 and 21.7 km/h (13.5 mi/h) in Round 2. A pickup truck with a reverse tow system was used to propel the bogie. One triaxial piezoresistive accelerometer system with a range of ± 200 g was mounted on the bogie near its center of gravity and used to measure acceleration in the longitudinal, lateral, and vertical directions at a sample rate of 3,200 Hz. Three pressure tape switches, spaced at 1-m intervals and placed near the end of the bogie track, were used to determine the speed of the bogie before impact. Two high-speed digital video cameras, operating at either 500 or 29.97 frames per second, were independently used to document the tests. All dynamic tests recorded the force–time profiles using accelerometer data.

Results

The following sections summarize static and dynamic test results for Round 1 and Round 2. This information was used to determine the necessary post diameter for successful performance in the MGS. A complete listing of the test results for Phase II is given in Appendix C. Selected percentiles for the population samples are shown in Appendix D.

Figure 2—Test setup for (a) static and (b) dynamic tests.

Figure 3—Static test setup showing the location of loading and LVDTs.

Static and Dynamic Tests

Both static and dynamic results for SWMOE, MOR, and peak load are presented in Table 2 for comparison.

Phase IIa (Round 1) Testing

Box plots summarizing the Round 1 test results for peak load and MOR are shown in Figures 4a and 5a, respectively. As would be expected, the most restrictive grading condition, SKN-HRD, had the highest values for all species tested. As is expected with wood, the average dynamic test results for MOR and peak load were always higher than the static. The low-grade LKN-LRD material and the SKN-LRD material were not statistically different from each other in the test for the three species groups but were consistently in the lower part of the overall populations distribution. Also, the difference in MOR between the strength of PP and the other stronger structural species DF and SYP was clearly evident.

The peak load, MOR, and material dimensions were studied to determine if any changes were required. Peak load capacity is a principal parameter for guardrail post design. Based on previous MGS post testing, a peak load of 44.5 kN (10,000 lb) was selected as the target for the round post tests. The peak load level of the PP, given its size (215.9-mm (8.5 in.) diameter top end) compared to that of DF and SYP (190 mm and 184 mm $(7-1/2)$ in. and 7-1/4 in.), respectively), was considerably higher than the desired value. After analyzing the data, the research team decided that the SYP and DF posts could be reduced slightly in diameter and still perform adequately in the MGS. The results also suggested that a larger reduction in the PP cross section may be possible for the post to carry loads similar to those of SYP, and a slightly smaller post size for SYP should be investigated. The new sizes for Round 2 were a top-end diameter of 190.5 mm (7-1/2 in.) for PP, 171 mm (6-3/4 in.) for DF, and 177.8 mm (7-in.) for SYP.

After the first test round, important flaws were found in the standard methods used in the dynamic cantilever bogie tests. Post strength may have been overestimated by as much as 50% because of the effects of inertia, leading to inaccurate and misleading diameter calculations. An alternative procedure was investigated in a series of three additional cantilever bogie tests. These tests confirmed the problem and showed that a reduction in bogie impact speed would substantially reduce the effects of inertia, leading to a more accurate prediction of ultimate fiber stress. Unfortunately, the flaws were not identified in time to modify the original diameter calculations because the posts had already been ordered; however, the adjustments were utilized in the second round of tests.

Phase IIb (Round 2) Testing

The results of Round 2 tests for peak loads and MOR are shown in Figures 4b and 5b, respectively. The most restrictive grading condition, SKN-HRD, had values that are in

^a DF, Douglas-fir; PP, ponderosa pine; SYP, southern yellow pine.

 b BKN LRD, big knots and ≤ 4 rpi; SKN LRD, small knots and ≤ 4 rpi; SKN HRD, small knots and ≥ 6 rpi; Pop., population, random mixture of posts.

the upper portion of the population's property distribution. Again, the low-grade LKN-LRD material and the SKN-LRD material were not consistently different from each other in the testing. But these knot–rpi conditions were consistently in the lower part of the overall population distribution. The population results suggest that the diameters of DF and SYP were close to the desired 44.5-kN (10,000-lb) peak load level. The size of the PP material, however, should be increased.

Other Observations From Phase II Testing

Knot size did not seem to have a consistent impact on load capacity of the round posts. The knots and rpi data indicated that the most substantial gains in post strength were obtained by raising the rpi value. A higher rpi count increased the average MOR and peak loads for all species by 40% and consistently placed the material tested into the upper part of the population distribution. The comparison of the results from Rounds 1 and 2 dynamic and static testing suggested a dynamic magnification factor of 20% to 30%.

A 3% failure rate was established as an acceptable level of risk for the system to fail; system failure was defined as the failure of four consecutive posts when the system was subjected to NCHRP Report No. 350 test level-3 (TL-3) criteria. The proper minimum size was determined using elastic bending equations and estimated MOR. Sixty percent of the posts needed to withstand an impact force of 42.3 kN (9,500 lb) at a height of 632 mm (24.875 in.) or a bending moment of 26.7 kN-m (236.3 \times 10³ lb-in.). A detailed description of the sizing criteria can be found in Hascall's thesis (Hascall 2005). The resulting target sizes were 165 mm (6-1/2 in.) for DF, 184 mm (7-1/4 in.) for PP, and 177.8 mm (7 in.) for SYP. These sizes were investigated in the Phase III soil embedment testing.

Discussion

The major purpose of the small-diameter round guardrail post project was to develop a new MGS that could utilize round posts from DF, SYP, and PP. This research paper documents the test results for Phase II of the small-diameter round guardrail post project. The test results summarized here and the Phase III soil embedment tests have provided enough information for the development of a full-size guardrail system. BARRIER VII computer simulations,

Figure 4—Box plots for peak load for Round 1 (a) and Round 2 (b) dynamic and static tests. Where appropriate, box plots show 5th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 95th percentiles and extreme points. Dashed lines represent mean values. BKN, big knots; SKN, small knots; LRD, low rpi; HRD, high rpi; POP, population.

Figure 5—Box plots for MOR for Round 1 (a) and Round 2 (b) dynamic and static tests. Where appropriate, box plots show 5th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 95th percentiles and extreme points. Dashed lines represent mean values. BKN, big knots; SKN, small knots; LRD, low rpi; HRD, high rpi; POP, population.

based on work by Powell (1973), have been used to estimate the sizes required for the round PP, DF, and SYP guardrail posts to perform effectively in the MGS. More information on the methodology to determine post size and embedment depth can be found in other publications (Hascall 2005, Kretschmann and others 2006, Haskell and others 2007).

Recommended Grading Criteria

The complete size and grading criteria are given in Appendix E. These criteria were developed after reviewing the static and dynamic test data, the population distribution of knots and ring density, and simulation results. The criteria were chosen to be restrictive enough to reduce the diameter of the posts as much as possible, but relaxed enough to allow a high percentage of the posts to qualify. The grading criteria that were developed for the full-size MGS crash test systems are given in Table 3. For the grading criteria, the diameter at groundline (0.914 m from base) rather than the top-end diameter was specified.

The results and computer simulations indicated that the following posts should perform successfully in the MGS design: 184-mm-diameter DF posts with ≤38-mm knots and \geq 6 rpi, 203-mm-diameter PP posts with \leq 89-mm knots and ≥6 rpi, and 190-mm-diameter SYP posts with ≤64-mm knots and \geq 4 rpi, each with a 1:10 slope of grain.

Conclusions

The static and dynamic component testing conducted at FPL and MwRSF provided sufficient information to allow for the following conclusions:

- Properties can be fine tuned for DF and PP by adjusting size and grading criteria to allow substitution for SYP in round strong-post W-beam guardrail systems.
- For a given diameter, rpi had more impact on the properties of the post than did knots.

Species	Diameter at groundline	Knot size	Ring density (rpi)	Slope of grain
Douglas-fir	184 mm	\leq 38 mm	>6	1:10
	$7 - 1/4$ in.	\leq 1-1/2 in.		
Ponderosa pine	203 mm	\leq 89 mm	>6	1:10
	8 in.	\leq 3-1/2 in.		
Southern yellow pine	190 mm	≤ 64 mm	>4	1:10
	$7 - 1/2$ in.	\leq 2-1/2 in.		

Table 3—Criteria for Midwest Guardrail System posts

• Round guardrail posts represent a feasible use for forest thinnings generated by fuel loading management programs.

Future Work

Final full-scale crash testing results for DF and PP will be documented in a future MwSRF research report. Detailed drawings of the MGS for round PP, DF, and SYP posts will be published at a future date. Finally, an installation guide will be produced to assist in assembly of the system.

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Appendix A—Detailed Work Schedule

Appendix B—Example Data Sheet

Knot Map - guardrail testing

Sample # Sample ID

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Appendix C—Phase II Data

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Appendix D—Percentiles of Phase II Data

Appendix E—Guardrail Post Grading Criteria

General Criteria

All posts shall meet the current quality requirements of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) 05.1, "Wood Poles" except as supplemented herein.

Manufacture

All posts shall be smooth shaved by machine. No "ringing" of the posts, as caused by improperly adjusted peeling machine, is permitted. All outer and inner bark shall be removed during the shaving process. All knots and knobs shall be trimmed smooth and flush with the surface of the posts. The guardrail posts will be a minimum of 1.75 m (69 in.) long. The use of peeler cores is prohibited.

Groundline

The groundline, for the purpose of applying these restrictions of ANSI 05.1 that reference the groundline, shall be defined as being located 914 mm (36 in.) from the butt end of each post.

Size

The size of the posts shall be classified based on their diameter at the groundline and their length and will be species specific. The groundline diameter shall be specified by diameter in 6-mm (1/4-in.) breaks. The length shall be specified in 300-mm (1-ft) breaks. Dimensions shall apply to fully seasoned posts. When measured between their extreme ends, the post shall be no shorter than the specified lengths but may be up to 75 mm (3 in.) longer.

Scars

Scars are permitted in the middle third as defined in ANSI 05.1 provided that the depth of the trimmed scar is not more than 1 in.

Shape and Straightness

All timber posts shall be nominally round in cross section. A straight line drawn from the centerline of the top to the center of the butt of any post shall not deviate from the centerline of the post more than 32 mm (1-1/4 in.) at any point. Posts shall be free from reverse bends.

Splits and Shakes

Splits or ring shakes are not permitted in the top two-thirds of the post. Splits not to exceed the diameter in length are permitted in the bottom third of the post. A single shake is permitted in the bottom third, provided it is not wider than one-half the butt diameter.

Decay

Allowed in knots only.

Holes

Pin holes 1 mm (1/16 in.) or less are not restricted.

Slope of Grain

1:10.

Compression Wood

Not allowed in the outer 25 mm (1 in.) or if exceeding 1/4 of the radius.

Timber Spacers

When timber spacers are required, the timber species shall be the same as those furnished for the timber posts. The size and hole location shall be as shown on the plans, with a tolerance of 6 mm (1/4 in.). Spacers shall be of medium grain, at least 4 rings per inch on one end, and free from splits, shakes, compression wood, or decay in any form. Individual knots, knot clusters, or knots in the same cross section of a face are permitted, provided they are sound or firm, and are limited in cumulative width (when measured between lines parallel to the edges) to no more than one-half the width of the face. Wane or the absence of wood is limited to one-third of the face on no more than 10% of the lot. Slope of grain deviation is limited to 1 in 6. The material may be rough sawn or surfaced, full size, hit or miss, with a tolerance of 6 mm (1/4 in.) for all dimensions.

Treatment

Each post treated shall have a minimum sapwood depth of 19 mm (3/4 in.) as determined by examination of the tops and butts of each post. Material that has been air-dried or kiln-dried shall be inspected for MC in accordance with AWPA standard M2 prior to treatment. Tests of representative pieces shall be conducted. The lot shall be considered acceptable when the average MC does not exceed 25%. Pieces exceeding 29% MC shall be rejected and removed from the lot, but the moisture reading for those pieces included in the average for the lot.

Treatment shall be in accordance with the following: American Wood-Preservers' Association (AWPA) Standards, Use Category System (UCS) U1-05: User specification for treated wood commodity, specification B for Posts; 4.1 Wood for Highway Construction; guardrail and spacerblocks must meet Classification UC4B retention levels using the processing and treatment standards outlined in T1-05 Section 8.2 for Posts. This includes the pressure treatment process requirements listed in Table 8.2.2 and penetration specifications given in Table 8.2.6 for UC4B exposure.

Species-Specific Criteria

Douglas-fir

Knot diameter for posts of Douglas-fir shall not exceed 51 mm (2 in.). Ring density for the species shall be at least 6 rpi as measured over a 76-mm (3-in.) distance. The diameter of the Douglas-fir posts shall be 184 mm (7.25 in.) at the groundline with an upper limit of 203 mm (8.0 in.).

Investigating the Use of Small-Diameter Softwood as Guardrail Posts

Ponderosa Pine

Knot diameter for posts of ponderosa pine posts shall not exceed 100 mm (4 in.). Ring density for the species shall be at least 6 rings per inch as measured over a 76-mm (3-in.) distance. The diameter of the ponderosa pine posts shall be 203 mm (8.0 in.) at the groundline with an upper limit of 222 mm (8.75 in.).

Southern Yellow Pine

Knot diameter for posts of southern yellow pine shall not exceed 76 mm (3 in). Ring density for the species shall be at least 6 rings per inch as measured over a 76- mm (3-in.) distance. The diameter of the southern yellow pine posts shall be 197 mm (7-3/4 in.) at the groundline with an upper limit of 216 mm (8-1/2 in.).