

Lake County Examiner

January 26, 2006

Fremont Sawmill changes with times: Longtime industry is Lake County's largest private employer

Photo & Story by Dennis Bateman

The smell of freshly cut wood and the whine of steels saws were very common place in Lakeview for the greater part of the 20th Century. As many as 10 sawmills were operating during the boom years of Lake County's timber industry. But with increased logging restrictions and the rise of environmental lobbying, the work that was a vital part of the country's economy began to dwindle.

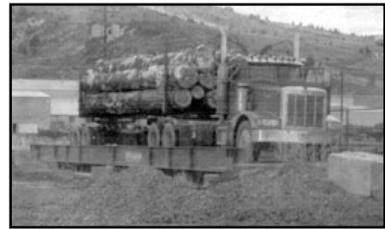
In this present day, only one sawmill remains operating in Lake County. Established in the 1940's, the Fremont Sawmill still keeps up a busy workload for about 100 full time employees, which makes it the county's largest private employer. Through the years, the Fremont Sawmill has withstood the considerable changes to its industry to remain a tent pole for the local economy.

"We've taken a practical approach to change with the times," said Gen. Mgr. Kerry A. Hart. "The government placed heavy restrictions on the industry, and mills started dropping left and right." Hart, who has been in the logging and timber industry for 30 years, said the watershed event was the passage of the Northwest Forest Plan in 1990. A conservation plan that was designed to aid in the recovery of the spotted owl which was deemed an endangered species. The ensuing restrictions severely limited logging on public lands, and the timber industry went into a serious decline.

While other mills closed down, Fremont Sawmill stayed in business. As part of the Collins Companies, which celebrated their 150th anniversary in 2005, the local mill has benefited from the support of their parent company.

"The Collins family has taken a paternalistic approach and made a commitment to this community," said Hart, who has worked for eight different companies in his career before settling at Fremont Sawmill five years ago. "Other companies may not have stuck it out like they have."

Throughout the year, the Fremont Sawmill maintains a busy workload. With 80,000 acres of forest owned by the sawmill forming 20 percent of its business base, the remaining four-fifths



The first step in the lumber-making process is when logging trucks arrive at the scales to be weighed.



A grapple is used to sort and stack logs prior to their being conveyed to the mill for cutting.



Logs are then unloaded from the trucks and placed in piles according to type.



Darrell Blair works on filing a saw. With maintenance, saws can be sharpened and retooled to extend their usefulness.

comes from public and private lands. As a sustained-yield unit, the timber in Lake County helps support the sawmill by providing a variety of different timber.

Ponderosa pine represents 70 percent of the wood harvested by the mill, which subcontracts to local logging crews. White fir constitutes 25 percent, and the remaining five percent is made up of lodge pole, incense cedar, and sugar pine. According to Hart, on average there are about 35 trucks that make hauls every business day. During peak hours in the summertime, the sawmill can handle over 100 trucks per day.

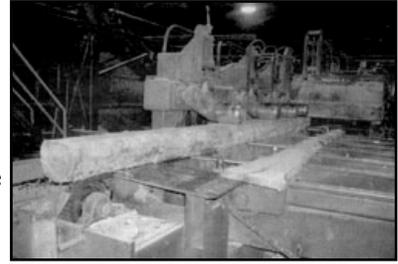
During the current winter months, the pace is somewhat slower, with about 15 truck loads arriving per day. The first step for the logging process is for each truckload to be weighed upon arrival. After driving onto the scales, the truckload is brought to the outside yard, where gigantic log loaders will clamp around the logs and lift them off the truck. The loaders then drop the logs into piles, while the empty truck is reweighed.

Mechanical grapples will then sort the logs if needed, and then depending on what particular type of wood is being processed that week, they are brought over to the mill. Each log is then stripped of its part and sawed into manageable parts. Scanners determine the size and width, and the process ensures that the maximum amount of lumber can be obtained from each log.

Very little is wasted in the process, as pine chips are collected and can be trucked to the Collins Company factory in Klamath Falls, where it is made into hardboard siding. Sawdust is also collected and shipped out via railroad where it will be taken to a factory to be made into paper.

Though the automated process is highly efficient, the system still requires a lot of human involvement. Workers personally check each board for defects at several points along the way. As bundles are processed, forklift operators will make a printed inventory and stack the lumber before it is eventually processed inside the large kilns, which evaporate the accumulated water in the boards as part of the finishing process before the boards are ready for sale.

In a given year, Fremont Sawmill produces 60 million boards. The mill remains an integral part of the Lake County economy.



The automated process will scan and cut each log to bring out the maximum amount of lumber.



Tony Mungarro checks lumber boards for defects.



Tim Murphy staples an inventory sheet to a load that will be stacked, awaiting final processing.



Now being loaded onto trucks, the completed lumber is ready for shipping.