

9/15/2007 5:07:00 AM

Officials break ground for new sawmill

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for the East Oregonian

BOARDMAN - Sustainable was the word at the ground-breaking event for Greenwood Tree Farm's Pacific Albus sawmill near Boardman on Friday.

Jeff Nuss of Greenwood Resources, Eric Schooler of The Collins Companies, Morrow County Judge Terry Tallman and Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury hefted shovels at the ceremony held among thousands of young poplar trees at the mill site. Speeches focused on the environmental, economic and social benefits of the project.

The new mill is a joint venture by Greenwood Resources, Collins and the Port of Morrow. The entire project includes a sawmill at the tree farm and drying kilns and a planing mill at the Port of Morrow. Collins expects the sawmill to begin milling rough lumber in May or June 2008.

GreenWood Resources is a specialized company focusing on high-yield, fast-growing tree farms. The company manages the Greenwood Tree Farm Fund and the four tree farms currently owned by the fund.

Potlatch originally planted the poplars at the Boardman Tree Farm to provide chips for pulp, then decided the trees had more value as saw logs. Greenwood bought the tree farm and brought in The Collins Companies to develop the sawmill.

"Collins is one of the leading manufacturers of Forest Stewardship Council certified wood in North America. That's why they're a great partner for us," said Jeff Nuss, Greenwood chief executive officer.

The Forest Stewardship Council certifies that timber operations maintain the health of the total forest ecosystem, support sustainable production and provide social and economic benefits to the surrounding communities. Nuss said that major retailers try to have a percentage of their lumber come from sustainably managed forests and look for the FSC certification.



Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury, Greenwood Resources CEO Jeff Nuss, Morrow County Judge Terry Tallman and The Collins Companies CEO Eric Schooler wield shovels to break ground for the new Pacific Albus sawmill near Boardman. Photo by Lee Farren.

Collins plans to market the poplar, branded as Pacific Albus to differentiate it from other poplar varieties, for niche markets that can benefit from the wood's strength, low density and light color.

"To be successful we need to focus on the positive attributes of Pacific Albus and find a home for it," said Lee Jimerson of The Collins Companies.

He listed slats for suspended ceilings, Venetian blinds, picture frames, molding, furniture and various uses in the recreational vehicle industry.

FSC certification comes into play with the other niche market Collins is looking at, leaders in energy and environmental design who are conscientious about the environment.

"The idea is that if you intensively manage a small amount of acreage in a tree farm, you relieve pressure on more critical habitat where you're trying to manage for water and biodiversity and so on," Jimerson said.

In addition, Collins plans to implement as many green features as possible in the sawmill in an effort to reduce the operation's environmental footprint.

"That way we'll stay around longer and be more sustainable," Jimerson said.

One benefit both Nuss and The Collins Companies see to the venture is the long-range availability of timber from the tree farm.

"The mill knows year-in and year-out it has a set amount of volume to process," Nuss said. "There's not issue of supply. Our logs will be available forever."

The new mill will be the largest hardwood sawmill in the United States.

"I don't recall the last time a new sawmill was announced and actually constructed, said Gary Neal, general manager for the Port of Morrow. "The trend all over the Northwest, unfortunately, has been for sawmills to close."

GreenWood and Collins expect to employ 150 people at the tree farm and the mill by the summer of 2008, when the mill opens. Most of them will come from the local area. Production is expected to reach 100 million board feet annually.

"This is exactly the kind of effort that moves us in a sustainable direction," Secretary of State Bill Bradbury told the audience at the ground-breaking ceremony. "The more we can add value to our resources the more our people in Oregon benefit. This project offers us an economic, environmental and social future."