

Lumber

Continued from Page 2A

Last year's pandemic-caused lumber market disruptions are largely to blame for the high prices, and they include shifts in homebuilding trends, layoffs at sawmills and limited production as the virus appeared. Demand is high, and producers are trying to keep up.

Sawmills began limiting production and, in some cases, laying off workers during the pandemic's early months. New home construction also stalled around the same time.

"We were making a product nobody was buying," Roscoe said.

Seneca didn't lay off employees, but reduced hours and shifted production crews to other duties. But before long, the pandemic created a lumber demand: People were now shopping for homes with months of isolation ahead and starting do-it-yourself projects.

Demand for wood continued to grow through 2020 and into 2021, and prices kept rising.

It isn't for a lack of wood: U.S. timber production in February reached a 13-year high.

"The lumber market is extremely strong. It's the highest since I've been in business, and I've been in business 39 years," said Mike Pihil, owner of Mike Pihil Logging Co. and president of Oregon natural resources worker advocacy group Timber Unity. "It's not really helping out the loggers right now because there are so many logs on the market."

Oregon's 2020 wildfires have created an excess of locally available timber, Pihil said. Many landowners are salvaging what they can before the wood becomes unusable.

"This is an epic event. We've never seen this in our lifetime and hopefully we'll never see it again," Pihil said. "But just wait. Two years from now, there's not going to be any logs on the market because that 40-year supply is gone. It was burnt up and sent to the mill."

Roscoe said availability of wood is only one part of the equation. Lumber mills need time to scale up production, but other aspects of the market are in disarray, including the loss of harvesting equipment in the fires and altered timber harvesting timelines statewide.

"There's a lot of access to wood right now to the degree mills are willing to take black logs, so that part is good," Roscoe said. "But there's layers of complexity on everything."

A costly time to rebuild

How deeply the cost of building materials will affect those trying to rebuild after the fires will depend much on how well their insurance policies will adjust to those rising prices.

Blue River resident Terry Herndon



Many of the workers at Freres Lumbers' Mass Plywood Plant have been able to social distance due to technology such as robots and cranes. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL



Freres Lumber Company president Rob Freres has donated \$1 million to the Defeat the Sales Tax Now committee. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

has had the ash and debris cleared away from his lot and is in the early stages of rebuilding efforts. He recently spoke with his insurance company and was told his replacement cost policy would cover the rising cost of lumber.

"They wanted a quote. The longer it takes, the more it's going up," Herndon said.

From the trailer on her parents' property, Melanie Stanley can see the now-cleared lot where her Blue River home stood before the Holiday Farm Fire. There are already a number of things weighing on her rebuilding plans, such as building permits and septic systems.

Add to it the rising cost of materials to rebuild her home and her store.

"Most people aren't insured well enough to be able to deal with the full replacement costs with the price of lumber," she said. "Nobody foresees a 300% increase in the cost of building materials. That's kind of where everything is sitting: exponential increases."

Stanley said her insurance likely will make possible rebuilding her home back



Freres Lumber workers sorting veneer are separated by plastic dividers on Oct. 22, 2020, in Mill City. The measure was taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

to what it was before the fire, but she had hoped to build back her store, Meyer's General Store and Liquor Shop, bigger and better. Now she expects to have to scale back those plans.

"Where we may have been looking at hopefully upgrading the size of the building ... we may not be able to do that now simply because of the cost," Stanley said.

Supply chain issues are limited to just wood products at the major lumber mills. It's hitting all wood products.

Freres said he waited over a year for two deck chairs to be delivered to his house last weekend.

"Just for two chairs," he said. "They're nothing extraordinary. They're just two wooden chairs with cushions on the back and on the seat. Two of them."

Heat rule

Continued from Page 1A

"Oregon's unions are firmly committed to making sure Oregon OSHA creates the strongest rules possible so that outdoor or indoor workers who are exposed to excessive heat and wildfire smoke are protected as best as possible," Graham Trainor, Oregon AFL-CIO president, said in a March press release. "The stakes are too high for anything less."

OSHA spokesperson Aaron Corvin said farmers, including Farm Bureau members, have been invited into the process at every step since February when the rule was first proposed.

The agency unveiled resources to help employers and workers understand the rule at the beginning of June, including an online training course that fulfills parts of the rule's training requirement and is available in English and in Spanish. Two fact sheets about the rule are available in English and will soon be available in Spanish, according to OSHA's website.

"We're talking about exposures to a very real hazard," Corvin said. "We have been engaging with stakeholders and employers [since February] to help them understand. We want them to be successful. They have an obligation to maintain safe and healthy workplaces."

The specifics

There are four main components to the new rule: shade, water, breaks, and preventative training.

Employers must provide at least one shade area, natural or artificial, when the heat index reaches 80 degrees.

Employers also are required to provide enough water for each employee to be able to drink 32 ounces per hour. The water must be cool or cold — no warmer than 77 degrees Fahrenheit. Employees can substitute some, but not all, of the day's water requirement with caffeine-free electrolyte drinks such as Gatorade.

Employers must choose between three rest break schedule options based on workload. Rest break schedules don't apply until the heat index reaches 90 degrees.

Each of these decisions must be documented in a written plan.

OSHA will enforce the rule based on complaints from employees and work-

place inspections focused specifically on heat. Corvin said the agency has maintained a heat emphasis program, meaning inspectors specifically focus on heat safety, since 2017, before the rule was adopted or even proposed. Enforcing the new rule shouldn't come at an extra cost, he said.

The minimum penalty for a "non-serious" violation is \$100, according to an agency fact sheet. The minimum penalty for a willful violation — in which an employer purposefully disregards the rule — is \$9,753.

Resources available

- Heat illness prevention online course available in English and Spanish
 - Fact sheet about the key requirements of the heat rule available in English
 - Fact sheet about the heat rule's rest break schedule options for preventing heat illness available in English
 - A worker's right to a safe and health workplace.
 - Free Oregon OSHA consultations for employers to improve workplace safety and health programs — no fault, no citations, no penalties.
 - Questions about how to apply rules to your workplace? Contact Oregon OSHA specialists.
 - A-to-Z topic index, including pages for heat illness prevention and wildfire smoke.
 - Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services (includes Oregon OSHA as a division) Multicultural Communications Program, provides outreach to communities with limited English proficiency. The toll-free number for Spanish-speaking Oregonians: 800-843-8086.
 - Ombuds Office for Oregon Workers for help understanding workplace safety and health rights, and workers' compensation rights.
- Oregon OSHA also adopted wildfire smoke rules in May. The wildfire smoke rule will take effect July 1. Resources to help understand and comply with the wildfire smoke rule are coming.
- Shannon Sollitt covers agricultural workers in the Mid-Willamette Valley as a corps member for Report for America, a program that aims to support local journalism and democracy by reporting on under-covered issues and communities. You may reach her at ssollitt@statesmanjournal.com.*



Housing matters.

When you have a healthy place to sleep, life opens up. Safe, stable, affordable housing makes it possible to rest, study, plan and dream. Healthy communities are those in which everyone has access to housing. With more affordable housing options, more Oregonians can lead healthy lives.

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