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An assortment of biomass logs are staged for use at Heartwood Biomass in Wallowa. The small-diameter log facility makes use of timber that is too small to sell to a standard lumber mill.

New name, new investors

Biomass company changes name, but mill's work remains the same

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA — Integrated Biomass Resources in Wallowa has changed its name to Heartwood Biomass LLC to mark new beginnings for the small-diameter wood products facility.

But little else will change, Heartwood CEO David Schmidt said.

The name change was announced Wednesday, March 31, in a press release that said the mill continues to benefit from community support as well as a new investor base and a rejuvenated leadership team.

As for change in operations, Schmidt discounted any likelihood.

“There won’t be. Not a lot,” he said. “There will be a little bit less stress on us and ability to keep building what we set out to do and be more effective.”

Started in 2009, Schmidt and wife, Jesse, came to Wallowa after nonprofit Wallowa Resources first began developing a vision in 1996 to move to a restoration-based forest economy. The business was designed specifically to monetize low-value, small-diameter timber from forest restoration projects, the release stated. Validating the need for companies like IBR, the U.S. Forest Service’s local forest restoration contracts grew from just one in the first five years of the business, to eight over the next five years.

Unlike traditional mills, the Heartwood facility can process small-diameter trees that increasingly dominate Western forests. Too small to be processed by traditional mills and used for lumber, these smaller trees are often left standing in tightly spaced forests, contributing to high-intensity, catastrophic wildfires and insect infestation that can destroy entire forest stands.

Heartwood uses them to create wood products like bundled firewood for grocery stores; agricultural poles for hop, vineyard and orchard trellising; and fence posts for ranches.

Heartwood grew out of a group of investors who identified an opportunity for broad impact at the intersection of rural jobs, forest restoration and community resilience. The company believes the



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Above, an operator enters a biomass log into the debarking line at Heartwood Biomass in Wallowa. Below, kiln-dried firewood stands ready to be bundled for retail customers.



Heartwood facility is a scalable model that can boost forest health and community vitality across the Western U.S.

“We believe it’s critical to adapt our region’s economy to focus on what our forests and communities need, which is restoration and stewardship,” David Schmidt said.

After nearly a decade of growth, a devastating fire at the IBR facility in 2019 threatened to undo the company’s progress. With the backdrop of wildfires rampaging across the Western U.S.

and the growing need to pivot rural communities’ natural-resource dependence to land restoration, a group of investors who had been following the important work of IBR embarked on a capital-raising campaign. The result culminated in the formation of Heartwood and its recent acquisition of nearly all assets of the original facility.

“I had the blessing to have grown up in Wallowa County and know how important Heartwood’s business is in creating healthy forests for our planet and providing jobs and economic growth for this

community,” said investor Jeff Nuss, founder and past president/CEO of GreenWood Resources. “I know I can speak for all of the investors when I say we are incredibly excited to be able to come alongside the management team and continue this important work. We believe these types of impact investments are in critical demand and Heartwood’s business model has a great opportunity to expand to other places.”

Heartwood was able to retain all the approximately 20 employees and the management team, as well as add important management capacity and infrastructure. The company will continue serving the established customer base and partnering with the strong supplier and contractor community that had been integral to the growth of the original business. Heartwood plans to look for opportunities to expand throughout the Western U.S.

For more information about Heartwood Biomass or to seek employment opportunities, visit heartwoodbiomass.com.

“We’re going to be continuing to do more timber sales and lots of stuff,” David Schmidt said.

Focus now on NOAA salmon recovery

Plans look at all aspects; project cost could top \$139M over 10 years

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Idaho Rep. Mike Simpson’s proposal to tear out four dams on the Snake River has brought renewed focus on the Columbia River System Operations environmental impact statement and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries’ salmon recovery plan.

“Many factors contributed to the decline of salmon,” NOAA West Coast public affairs officer Michael Milstein told the Capital Press. “Dams were a big part of it, but not all of it. So they must be part of the solution. That has been happening in terms of overhauling the system to make fish a priority.”

The NOAA Fisheries recovery plans for Snake River salmon and steelhead are all being implemented across the basin, Milstein said.

The approximate cost of NOAA’s recovery plan is \$139 million over 10 years, he said. One of the main sources of funding is the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund, a stream of federal funds, Milstein said.

NOAA Fisheries has not evaluated Simpson’s plan, Milstein said.

“It goes beyond dam removal and threatened and endangered fish,” he said.

NOAA Fisheries develops recovery plans for threatened and endangered species listed under the Endangered Species Act. These recovery plans are voluntary and outline goals for improved survival across the life cycle — habitat, hatcheries, hydro power and harvest, Milstein said.

The environmental impact statement examines the operations of the dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers.

The plan outlines the improvements needed to achieve recovery. The plan goes beyond the dams to include other parts of the salmon life cycle, Milstein said.

NOAA’s biological opinion, commonly referred to as the “BiOp,” addresses the impact of the operation of the dams, but is not responsible for recovering

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Making concrete progress



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Mike Delpierre on Tuesday, April 6, 2021, cuts through a cinder block that will be a corner piece for the flower bed at The Local Station, 1508 Adams Ave., La Grande. The site was once home to a Texaco gas station. Developers Gust and Karin Tsiatsos are changing the property into a space for boutique ice cream, coffee and mercantile shops as well as public meeting areas. Gust Tsiatsos has said they want to create a place where tourists and locals can do more than just buy coffee. The La Grande Urban Renewal Agency in 2020 approved \$64,200 in funds for the project, which has a total cost north of \$400,000.

Study finds drought-breaking rains more erratic, rare across U.S. West

By **MATTHEW BROWN**
Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — Rainstorms grew more erratic and droughts much longer across most of the U.S. West over the past half-century as climate change warmed the planet, according to a sweeping government study released Tuesday, April 6, that concluded the situation is worsening.

The most dramatic changes were recorded in the desert Southwest, where the average dry period between rainstorms grew from about 30 days in the 1970s to 45 days between storms now, said Joel Biederman, a research hydrologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Southwest Watershed Research

Center in Tucson, Arizona.

The consequences of the intense dry periods that pummeled areas of the West in recent years were severe — more intense and dangerous wildfires, parched croplands and not enough vegetation to support livestock and wildlife. And the problem appears to be accelerating, with rainstorms becoming more unpredictable and more areas showing longer intervals between storms since the turn of the century compared to prior decades, the study concludes.

While previous research documented a decline in total rainfall for much of the West, the work by Biederman and colleagues put more focus on when that rain occurs. That has signif-

icant implications for how much water is available for agriculture and plants such as grasses that have shallow roots and need a steadier supply of moisture than large trees.

“Once the growing season starts, the total amount of rainfall is important. But if it comes in just a few large storms, with really long dry periods in between, that can have really detrimental consequences,” Biederman said in an interview.

The total amount of rain in a year doesn’t matter to plants — especially if rains come mostly in heavy bursts with large run-off — but consistent moisture is what keeps them alive,

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