

The Timber Industry of Today – Part 1 *continued from front page*

timber became difficult to reach. In 1953 the Long-Bell Lumber Company, another massive operation in the Northwest, purchased O-A. In August 1957 the last logs arrived at the Vernonia mill pond and on December 20 the mill shut down for good.

Vernonia still considers itself a logging town, but without the O-A mill, things are different now.

Who Owns the Trees

Logging in Oregon has changed since the days of the O-A Lumber Company. But one thing that hasn't changed much is who owns the land, and the trees that grow there.

In the 1920s O-A was successful because they owned large stands of Doug fir, including the massive DuBois Tract, which included over 22,000 acres of prime timberland west of Vernonia in Clatsop County.

Today the names have changed, but the land is still owned by large companies – Weyerhaeuser, Rayonier, Hancock Forest Management, Longview Fiber. What has really changed is the way those companies that own the trees operate. When O-A was here they logged the trees, transported them, milled them into products, and sold them. Today the large corporations own the land and trees and reap the profits from the harvests. Yes, they provide some jobs, but not to the same extent O-A did.

According to the Oregon Forest Resource Institute, nearly half of Oregon's total 63 million acre area is considered forestland, and Oregon is the country's number one producer of both dimensional lumber and plywood.

Of Oregon's 30 million acres of forests, 60% of it is owned by the federal government, but this federal land only accounts for 13% of timber harvest in 2019. 22% of Oregon's forests are owned by large (properties of 5,000 acres or more) private owners, 12% is owned by small (less than 5,000 acres) private landowners, and 4% is owned by the state and other public entities. But, despite owning just 22% of timberlands, those large private owners account for 66% of harvested timber in the state, while small landowners harvest just 12%.

Harvests on federally held lands started dropping significantly in the 1980s, from a high of over 4 billion board feet annually, to around 500 million today. Meanwhile harvests on large privately held lands have remained stable during that time period, hovering between 2 and 3 billion board feet each year.

Here in Columbia County the numbers are significantly different. 88% of the county's 420,000 acres are forested. Of that total acreage, just 5% is held by federal (2%) or state (3%) entities, while 61% is held by large private owners and 34% is held by small owners. Again, the large owners make up the bulk of the harvest with 80%, while small landowners take 13% of the harvest. The total harvest in Columbia County in 2017 was 177 million board feet.

In 2017 the forest sector supported a total of 61,000 jobs in Oregon in areas that include forest management and support, primary forest products (pulp and paper, sawmills and wood production, and veneer, plywood and engi-

neered wood), secondary forest products (doors, windows, kitchen cabinets and countertops, manufactured homes, wood buildings, pallets, furniture, etc.), and transport and distribution. In Columbia County timberlands create 856 jobs, 6% of the workforce, which pay an above average annual wage of \$51,487. In its heyday O-A alone employed around 800 people.

Who Does the Harvesting

In a town known for logging Mike Pihl is undoubtedly Vernonia's best known logger. A mainstay on the History Channel's reality television show *Ax Men* for five seasons, Pihl is also known locally for his work in the community – if there is a cause that needs assistance you can bet Mike Pihl is involved in some way. "Anything for Vernonia" is his patient response when he's asked to help.

But besides his TV celebrity and community work, Pihl is first and foremost a logger. He has run his own company, Mike Pihl Logging, for the last 38 years, and he currently employs around 22 people. Pihl works almost exclusively on small, private timberlands in Oregon, from Astoria to Mt. Hood. "Our average clear cut is about 10 acres," explains Pihl. He says the largest cut his outfit did last year was about 60 acres. "We have our own niche in the industry."

Pihl says the way his crews operate while on a job is extremely important to him. "We take a lot of pride in our work. When we come in to do a job, we're in someone's neighborhood and they feel like those trees belong to them, even if the trees are not on their property. So I make sure I knock on everyone's door, let them know what's going on, and ask if they have any problems with the property line. But we'll still get some backlash from the neighbors. We have a lot of personalities we have to deal with. We're really concerned about our public image, that's really important for us."

Work for Pihl is often market driven. "We don't want to cut someone's trees when the prices are down. Sometimes we just go in and take poles, sometimes we just take the cedar, sometimes we take the whole thing because the trees have reached maturity. We just finished a 100 acre thinning job by Astoria on a stand that is 41 years old. It's been in the family for three generations. If the market picks up they might take five acres a few years from now. So, we do what the landowner wants and what the timber markets are doing."

Replanting following a clear cut is required and is almost always done with Douglas fir, says Pihl. "We've tried to replant western red cedar, but one herd of elk going through will pull them all out, or one really hot day in the summer and they'll all die. Douglas fir is hearty, it's native, it's resilient. All the other species are pretty fragile when you

replant them."

Pihl says, rather than entering into a competitive bid process for logging jobs, he generally negotiates a price directly with the property owner. "We're noted for doing a very good job, so 99% of our jobs are negotiated, because people know the kind of work we do, we find the highest markets, and we care about the neighbors."

Once the trees have been cut, Pihl says he arranges for them to be shipped to 30 different designations, depending on the species of the trees, grade and lengths of the logs, and prices in the markets. He uses his own drivers to haul



logs and also subcontracts with drivers with their own trucks. "A lot of times we'll have up to a dozen different designations on one job," he explains. "Next time you see a load of logs going down the road, take a look and you'll notice either all the logs are uniform in either length, diameter, or species. Everything has its own designation." Pihl says he finds the right markets and the logs are sold to the mill. Once the logs are processed by the mill, the landowner and Pihl Logging receive a share of the profit from the mill.

"If we ever run low on work, I just get out and start knocking on doors and pounding the pavement and talk to the properties we are already managing and inform them of what the markets are doing," says Pihl. "In 38 years we've never been out of work. I love Vernonia and I want to help keep Vernonia employed. It's not just about cutting the trees, it's about the community."

Just a quick side note about local mills: Today there are just a handful of mills in operation in the region, including the RSG mill near Mist-Birkenfeld which processes around 90 million board feet of lumber per year, the Hampton Mill in Banks which processes about 85 million board feet, the Stimson Mill in Clatskanie, the Weyerhaeuser Mill in Longview, and Pacific Fiber in North Plains.

Pihl says strict state regulations require loggers to take care of the environment when they are working, although he says he would personally practice care even if those rules weren't in place. "I guarantee you, our company would be protecting the streams, replanting, hand spraying herbicides where necessary. We think about the future. We try as hard as we can to show the public that we really do care."

Pihl says he's seen a lot of changes in mechanization during his time in the industry, from a lot of handwork to mechanical logging, "...stroke boom delimiters, dangle heads, feller bunchers.

It does eliminate jobs, but it's also hard to find people to work in the industry now," he says.

There's another technological advance that Pihl says has made a huge difference in how he does his job. "When we talk about technological changes, it's always easy to bring up machinery, but believe it or not one of the biggest changes is the smart phone. We make sort changes from our phone. We can pull up aerial photos on our phone and look at property lines. It gives us the name and address of neighboring property owners. When I first started in the business I would say I spent several hours every day on pay phones. My smart phone saves me so much time and it's so much more convenient."

Recently Mike Pihl Logging purchased a new log truck with an engine that is rated Tier 4 – the most advanced, clean burning, and most efficient industrial diesel engine, which reduces emissions. "We do care about that," says Pihl. "Clean exhaust is important and every new machine we buy will be Tier 4."

As the current president of Timber Unity, which was organized to combat passage of proposed cap-and-trade legislation in the Oregon legislature last year, Pihl's biggest concerns about the continuation of the logging indus-

continued on page 10



**Recreational & Medical
Marijuana Dispensary**

Serving the Community

Featuring:

- Edibles • Concentrates
- CBD Oils, Topicals, & Tinctures
- Flower Grams & Pre-rolled Joints

**VERNONIA'S
NATURAL CHOICE**

Open 7 days 9am - 9pm
736 Bridge Street, Suite 1