

Closed for 15 years, Prairie Wood Products is back

BY STEVEN MITCHELL

Blue Mountain Eagle
Prairie City residents woke up last week to a sound they had not heard in years.

A working sawmill. The Prairie Wood Products sawmill officially reopened on Monday, July 11, for its first full day of operations.

The D.R. Johnson Lumber Co. announced last month that it intended to reopen the mill, which was shuttered 15 years ago. To staff the operation, the company hosted a two-day job fair at Chester's Thriftway in John Day.

Plant manager Tom Moore said the mill hired roughly 25 people. He said once the planer is up and running, he would be looking to hire between 15 and 20 more employees.

Prairie Wood Products President Jodi Westbrook said the company was happy to be able to hire the staff needed to get the mill running again. "They are working hard," she said. "I've been in the mill watching them go as hard as they can."

Westbrook said there are some kinks the sawmill has to work out with the old equipment. But all in all, she said, things are running smoothly at the mill.

"It is going," she said, "and we are thrilled."

Moore, who used to work for the DR Johnson-owned Grant Western



Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle

A forklift motors around the Prairie Wood Products yard on Thursday, July 14, 2022.

sawmill in John Day, told the Eagle that the mill's mothballed cogeneration plant has some issues that must be worked through before it can be fired up again.

Craig Trulock, Malheur National Forest supervisor, told the newspaper last month that the cogeneration plant could provide a way to remove biomass from the forest. Currently, he said, there is no market for that material.

The biomass, which consists of small logs, branches and bushes that would otherwise get burned up in the forest or left on the ground, could

be ground and burned in the cogeneration plant to generate heat and electricity, Trulock said.

Westbrook said the company plans to get its timber supply from a combination of public and private lands and will purchase logs from independent loggers and landowners.

Brett Morris, the owner of Morris Forestry, said in a Friday, July 15, interview that he had already delivered nine loads of logs to the sawmill. "(Prairie Wood) is really cranking up production," he said.

Morris said he works as an independent logger in the spring, but

during fire season he works as a wildland firefighter with his logging equipment, which makes him good money. With Prairie Wood open, he said he would be running his logging company during fire season.

In the long term, he said running his business would be better for him and his family.

"My family will appreciate that I won't be gone for two to three months in the summertime," Morris said.

Morris said his company had been about a month behind schedule with the late spring rain, but things are going well now.

He said if the mill had not been open in Prairie City, he would have had to haul logs to Elgin or Pilot Rock for milling. With rising fuel costs, there would have been a good chance he would not have been able to operate.

"My little company couldn't afford to haul (logs) that far with the way fuel is right now."

Having the mill open benefits local private landowners with respect to fuel reduction and removing wildfire risks, Morris added.

While Prairie Wood hopes to collaborate with the Malheur National Forest and other public agencies on forest restoration projects, Moore said the mill has primarily been working with private landowners so far.

He said the company hopes to build other relationships going forward.

Moore said he could not say how many board feet of timber the mill plans to process because it is in its "infancy stages."

Nonetheless, Moore — who worked for Malheur Lumber before coming to Prairie Wood Products — said that reopening the mill has been a great feeling.

"It is not every day," he said, "that you get to bring something back from the dead."

The Prairie City mill was purchased by the D.R. Johnson Lumber Co. in 1976. Two years later, the family-owned company added a stud mill and planer. Then, in the late 1980s, the company installed a cogeneration power plant.

The sawmill, which operated successfully in Prairie City for more than 30 years and employed upwards of 100 people who worked two different shifts, shuttered in 2008 amid a housing market crash that led to a lack of available sawlogs.

D.R. Johnson restarted the mill in early 2009 but shut it down permanently by the end of the year. The cleanup of the mill, which sits at the west end of Prairie City, concluded in 2019.

Since then, much of the mill equipment has remained on site, along with the co-gen plant.



ODFW

A trail camera photo shows an adult wolf with pups in the Upper Deschutes Wildlife Management Area in Central Oregon. ODFW has designated a new Area of Known Wolf Activity in the area, including parts of Deschutes and northern Klamath counties.

New group of wolves seen in southern Deschutes County

BY GEORGE PLAVERN

Capital Press

A new group of wolves has taken up residence in Central Oregon, including parts of Deschutes and northern Klamath counties.

State wildlife officials designated an Area of Known Wolf Activity in the Upper Deschutes Wildlife Management Unit, which extends from near Bend south to Crescent along U.S. Highway 97 and west to the Pacific Crest Trail.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife creates wolf activity areas in locations where the same wolves — not wolves passing through — use an area repeatedly over time. The designation also helps alert livestock producers about wolf presence.

Ranchers in the area should consider nonlethal measures to protect their livestock, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, such as hiring range riders or using flashing lights and alarms to scare away wolves.

ODFW also recommends removing any carcasses or bone piles that might attract wolves. Other deterrents may include guard dogs, electrified fencing of small pastures and fladry.

While Oregon's wolf management plan does allow for killing wolves in the event of repeated attacks on livestock, this does not apply west of highways 395, 78 and 95, where wolves remain federally protected under the Endangered Species Act. That includes the Upper Deschutes area.

The minimum known wolf population in Oregon based on verified evidence was at least 175 at the end of 2021, though ODFW acknowledges the actual population is likely higher.

Biologists began monitoring reports of a single wolf in the area in August 2021, and

one wolf was counted during ODFW's annual winter survey.

Earlier this year, tracks of four wolves were found in the area, though it wasn't immediately clear if they came from a new group of wolves or from the Indigo Pack, which occupies territory just to the south.

On July 4, a trail camera in the area snapped a photo of an adult wolf with five pups, confirming the new group.

Depending on how many wolves are in the group by year's end, it may be designated the Upper Deschutes Pack, with a pack being defined as having at least four wolves traveling together in winter — typically with at least two adults and their offspring.

ODFW says additional surveys will be conducted to learn more about the Upper Deschutes wolves' home range.

Wolf sightings from the public can be reported to ODFW online at www.dfw.state.or.us/wolves.

Oregon economy nears full recovery

Economist says construction sector is booming

BY PETER WONG

Oregon Capital Bureau

The addition of 8,700 jobs in June moves Oregon a little closer to full recovery from the pandemic downturn in spring 2020, when the official unemployment rate shot up to 13.2%.

Oregon's gains kept the statewide unemployment rate in June at 3.6%, essentially unchanged from the previous month (adjusted to 3.5%) and identical to the national average. The record low of 3.4% prevailed from November 2019 through February 2020, at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We continue to have a strong labor market," Gail Krumenauer, economist for the Oregon Employment Department, said Wednesday, July 20, in an online briefing for reporters. "Large job gains have been reported over many sectors of the economy. No broad sector of Oregon's economy had large job losses in June."

According to the June report, also issued July 20, construction led monthly gains with 2,800 jobs. Its 118,700

jobs overall is a historical peak for Oregon, surpassing the 112,300 in February 2020.

All construction industries grew rapidly over the past 12 months, with several growing by double-digits: Building finishing contractors, up 13.2%; building equipment contractors, up 11.5%; heavy and civil engineering construction, up 10.8%; and specialty trade contractors, up 10.7%.

Monthly growth also occurred in other services, such as auto repairs and hair salons, 1,600; health care and social assistance and leisure and hospitality (bars, entertainment, hotels and restaurants), 1,300 each.

"We have seen some sectors still struggle to get back to their pre-pandemic levels," Krumenauer said. She said the health care and social assistance sector has rebounded strongly in the first half of this year, after lagging through the end of 2021.

The leisure and hospitality sector also has added 28,500 jobs between June 2021 and June 2022, or 16.4% growth. But Krumenauer said recov-

ery in that sector is still only 87% of pre-pandemic levels, and 14,600 jobs remain to reach those levels.

She said public and private education continue to lag in job growth.

Oregon has regained 94% of the jobs lost during the pandemic, compared with 98% for the nation as a whole. For Oregon's private sector, that mark is 98%.

The Oregon Office of Economic Analysis, which prepares the state's quarterly economic and revenue forecasts, has projected that Oregon will see a complete recovery of jobs by the end of this year. When that occurs, the recovery period of two-and-a-half years from the downturn will have been relatively short — far shorter than the seven years Oregon required to recover from economic downturns in the 1980s and 2010s. Those earlier recessions did not see a record one-month jump in the unemployment rate from 3.4% to 13.2% during March and April 2020, unlike what happened in the pandemic —

"We have seen some sectors still struggle to get back to their pre-pandemic levels."

— Gail Krumenauer, economist for the Oregon Employment Department

but high unemployment rates persisted longer.

On Monday, July 18, the Employment Department released its second-quarter report on job vacancies. The agency has compiled such reports since 2013 — and the 106,500 vacancies in the newest report means that Oregon has now exceeded the 100,000 mark for a full year. Employers told the agency that three of every four vacancies was hard to fill. (Counting spring 2021, vacancies ranged between 97,000 and 107,000 for a record five quarters.)

"The need for workers was widespread," Krumenauer said. "Businesses are looking to fill a variety of jobs in more than 280 occupations. That means it's still a tight labor market where employers are having trouble trying to find enough workers."

In Oregon and the nation as a whole, she said there are two job vacancies for every unemployed person. Krumenauer said employers have raised pay, added benefits, increased job flexibility, changed job requirements, and advertised vacancies more widely, including the statewide network of WorkSource centers run by the Employment Department and partner agencies.

Big housing development planned in Pendleton

BY JOHN TILLMAN

East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The city plans development of commercial and residential properties on about 250 acres south of I-84 between Exits 210 and 216, within its urban growth boundary.

A road connecting Highway 11 near the Red Lion with Highway 30 at the Exit 216 intersection is estimated to cost \$8 million. Given elevation changes, the project will require a \$3 million water boost station, according to City Manager Robb Corbett.

"It's probably the biggest ever in Pendleton," Corbett said. "It's three times the size

of the Sunridge subdivision south of the middle school, but with an arterial road, allowing access to neighborhood streets. There could be 1,000 homes, plus commercial development in the western parcels."

McDonald's, Super 8 by Wyndham and Holiday Inn Express currently adjoin the planned commercial zone on its west.

Eastern Oregon Regional Airport covers nearly 3000 acres, not counting developments off Airport Road on N.W. Avenues A through N. But homes and businesses south of the airport and north of Westgate cover less

area than the planned project.

The Umatilla County Board of Commissioners approved a \$2 million revolving fund to Pendleton for the road in November and December last year. The city is applying for state and federal grants for the water and road projects now.

"Pendleton's policy is that developers have to pay their own way," Corbett said. "The city is trying to put the money together, with the understanding that the developer would pay us back. We're doing just enough right now, then we'll create a reimbursement district, allowing property owners to

repay us, based upon their development. There are huge upfront costs. We'll partner with developers to jump start the project. Once repaid, the money will be reinvested."

The city used its \$2 million from the county to make a loan to another developer building house on S.W. Nye Ave.

"The houses will be built and the loan repaid before the (Highways 11 and 30 connection) project gets off the ground," Corbett said.

The properties are still being farmed. They belong to the Rees and Goad families and Jim Whitney, Corbett reported.

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