

Menominee Tribal Enterprises celebrates century of lumber production

By Dennis Thornton

It's been 100 years since Menominee Tribal Enterprises started sawing logs in its mill on the Wolf River in Neopit, 15 miles north of Shawano. And at the rate it's going, even with producing millions of board feet of quality lumber each year, it will never run out of wood.

In fact, thanks to the MTE's sustainable yield forestry, there is more standing timber on the Menominee Reservation now than there was 150 years ago.

The business arm of the Menominee Tribe even turned a devastating tornado in the summer of 2007 into an opportunity, mobilizing loggers to quickly harvest the wood and turn it into lumber before it could spoil.

Despite a soft housing market, MTE President Adrian "Dusty" Miller said, MTE's products are selling well. Besides producing a variety of lumber for flooring and paneling, Menominee maple is again being used for the NCAA Final Four basketball tournament floor as well as the floor for the new Phoenix Suns arena. "They're dribbling on our floors," he said.

"This anniversary marks a tremendous milestone," Miller said. "The forest and mill are the heart and pulse of the community, a wonderful success story." The MTE operation provides "multiple riches" to tribal members and the community, including "employment, shelter, sustainability, health and spiritual wellness."

The secret? It's taking a long-range view and only harvesting a small percentage of the 220,000 acres of forest every year, according to Marshall Pecore, forest manager.

"We don't take the hot species," Pecore said, such as when oak is popular for furniture. "In the long term, the forest is higher quality. We're looking for quality, quantity and diversity (of species)."

Prime species to harvest are maple, oak, birch and pine, Pecore said. Less desirable species and smaller trees are sold or used as pulp rather than sawn and processed into lumber at the Neopit mill.

Under the sustained yield method, "the forest drives this mill," said Bill Schmidt, marketing manager. One area, usually 7,000 to 10,000 acres a year, is harvested as part of a 150-year rotation. It takes that long to grow the massive trees that are 10 inches or more in diameter.

There is some clear-cutting, but most logging is of individual trees in that year's designated stand of trees, Pecore said. Logged areas are given time to heal and naturally create the next generation of forest giants.

Schmidt said 85 percent of the mill's lumber stays in Wisconsin, which is home to a number of furniture makers and wood and veneer processors. But the tribe has been branching out, even exporting some products to China, while focusing on America first.

The mill is operating at capacity for one shift of workers, with about 150 in the mill and another 150 in the woods and in the forestry department.

Nature provided a major challenge when a devastating tornado struck the Menominee forest on June 6, 2007, blowing down everything in its path. The twister took down timber in an 11-mile stretch, as wide as one mile, totaling 3,000 acres.

“Time was of the essence,” Miller said, explaining that maple trees stain at temperatures above 50 degrees when they’re downed. “If it’s on the ground, that makes it worthless as lumber.”

Schmidt said the MTE management team reacted immediately, clearing miles of roads through the twisted trees and creating seven helicopter pads. Extra logging crews were brought in and the mill put on a second shift, processing 1 million board feet a week.

“We got 98 percent recovered, with very little staining,” Miller said. “We have a skilled management team that knew how to handle it. It was a cooperative effort. We had a plan.”

Long gone are the days when loggers used axes and teams of horses pulled the logs to the Wolf River, where they floated down to the mill. Trucks, chainsaws and sophisticated logging machinery is used and MTE keeps up with technological changes.

Every bit of a tree is used, Schmidt said, with logs cut into boards and waste collected to fire the mill’s furnaces. Sawdust and wood shavings are packaged and sold.

Menominee Tribal Enterprises has been studying adding an adjacent mill that would process smaller logs, up to 10 inches, Miller said. “That’s almost the same volume” as the larger logs, he said, and those are currently sold unprocessed.

Another project on the drawing board is constructing a biomass electrical plant that would burn forest wastes to produce about 20 megawatts of electricity.

National awards have come along, including a Forest Stewardship Award in 2003 from the National Hardwood Lumber Association and the President’s Award for Sustainable Development, presented in 1996 by President Bill Clinton. MTE provided the Christmas tree for the Wisconsin State Capitol in 2007.

Miller sees a bright future for the Menominee tribe, which remains on part of the homeland that their ancestors settled 10,000 years ago, right after the Ice Age.

“We have a three-legged stool,” he said, “environment, economy and social.”

One source of pride is a satellite photo taken of the reservation. “It’s an island of timber in an ocean of clear land,” Pecore said.

Menominee Tribal Enterprises strives to live up to the Menominees’ heritage as “the Forest Keepers.”