

TORNADO SALVAGE UNDERWAY IN WI

GOOD TIMBER HIT HARD IN POOR MARKET BUT LOGGERS STAY BUSY CLEANING UP

BY MIKE MONTE

On June 9, a tornado touched down in northeast Wisconsin. According to observers, the twister took about 12 minutes to travel roughly 40 miles and chew up a strip of timber that

is a half-mile wide in most places, and in at least one area, about a mile wide. Houses and businesses were lost in this tragedy, and some livestock didn't survive. Fortunately, there was no loss of human life. After the dust settled, it became apparent to the various forest landowners in the path that hard and urgent work was needed to salvage the timber left twisted and flattened on the ground, before staining set in and more dollars were lost.

The Menominee Tribal Forest is one of the grandest stands of timber in the Lake States. Because of some very unfair laws affecting the Menominee Tribe in the late 1800s, it wasn't legal to cut the timber as part of the huge clearcutting going on in the Lake States at that time, which hurt the tribe's financial fortunes at the time. The result, however, is a managed forest today whose managers have won industry and environmental awards back to back for their stewardship of this unique resource.

The tornado touched down towards the western boundary of the Menominee reservation and wreaked havoc in a line that ran east and north. According to head forester Marshall Pecore, an estimated 31 million board feet of timber

and 41,000 cords of pulpwood hit the ground prematurely on Menominee forest land. It is a strip about 12 miles long. According to Pecore, these stands have had three to four thinnings and the best trees were always left.

Visitors were led through the tribal forest lands by a young forester named Tony Waupochick. Waupochick has 12 years of experience on the Menominee forest and he is the harvest administrator for the blowdown. He sets up the sales

and administers the logging crews. He pointed out that there are normally about 23 crews working in the forest, and most of the time that number is for winter harvest. On the morning of June 10, Waupochick said the office was transformed from a routine place to work to something resembling a war zone. The damage had to be assessed and everybody scattered to various points along the storm's path trying to ascertain what they were up against. It wasn't easy to get around. Trees were blown over roads quite a distance from the actual storm path, but enough information was gleaned to conclude that a fly-over with photos was necessary to gauge the full extent of the damage. It was

determined that the flattened area plus the collateral damage amounted to 3,200 acres. The total acreage of the Menominee Tribal Forest is around the 220,000-acre mark and this certainly is not a big percentage of the total, but the value of the hardwood stands is significant.



Menominee forester Tony Waupochick stands in the hole created when this big hard maple went over in the storm.

There are now 35 crews working on the Menominee timber, and Waupoichick says that some of these crews have subcontractors who probably push the number of active crews up to 40 or so. According to Pecore, the goal is to finish up the salvage by October 31. Pecore says that the logging crews are becoming more proficient at harvesting the downed trees and production has increased as they learn new logging methods.

As the twister left the Menominee-owned hardwoods it also hit private ownerships. The tornado completely

leveled a popular resort called the Bear Paw, situated alongside Wisconsin State Highway 55. But, just before the Bear Paw was turned into foundations and twisted limbs, some of the best red oak owned by Kretz Lumber Company bit the dust.

Dennis Fincher is the Kretz forester in charge of salvaging the 100 acres of Kretz timber flattened by the storm. At the time of this writing, five weeks had passed since the storm, and according to Fincher, some stain is starting to show up on some of the basswood and pine.

Kevin Marshall, an Antigo, Wisconsin logger, has his crews on this site. Marshall, an old

hand at logging, is making the best of a bad situation. He has three processors working the Kretz blowdown, and because of cutting for grade logs and the terrible twisted condition of the timber mixed liberally with tree tops, processing timber is a slow operation. Processor operators have to clean off the

stems with the saw and grapple and then leave the cab with a logger's tape and paint can, marking out the saw cuts to maximize the grade of the logs.

Sometimes, the saw is used to limb a top, and wherever there is sawtimber, the rollers aren't used on the processor head, in order to keep the spike marks out of the jacket lumber. Because of this extra care and the meticulous cutting, one Fabtek double bunk forwarder can almost keep up with the three processors. Marshall does some of the extra work

to help his forwarder operator, Tom Fleischman, keep up. This site, like the Menominee salvage, is hilly, being part of the terminal moraine left over from the last ice age in Wisconsin.

Fincher says they are paying almost double to have the logs harvested, and Marshall says the stumpage price of the hardwood pulp he markets has been reduced to allow for the tough harvesting his crew faces.

Back in the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) planted thousands of acres of national forest cutover land in the upper Great Lakes with red pine. As the years passed, the pine grew and by the 1960s, (and in

some cases, earlier), the pine was thinned. Some of the red pine plantations were thinned three or four times, and had grown into sawtimber. As the tornado left the hardwoods, it entered into these very pretty red pine stands. In most areas, not a live tree was left, and the path of the storm is



Hardwood forests on the Menominee were decimated.



Nice red pine sawtimber on the Chequamegon/Nicolet National Forest didn't fare any better.

about a mile wide along Highway 64 just northwest of the village of Mountain, which was the site of the CCC camp that likely planted the pines. Most of this ground is part of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, and when the storm hit, there were a half dozen active sales in the blowdown area.

The Forest Service had to mobilize to salvage as much of the timber as possible. Forester Walt Ruckheim, ranger on the forest, said that there are provisions for catastrophic occurrences such as this built into the contract. Besides the timber on a

sale paid for by the logger, there was now the added volume on the ground. Boundaries were obliterated between sales, and future sales have to be estimated as well. One tool that will be used by the Forest Service is a helicopter equipped with a GPS unit and a paint gun mounted to the bottom of the aircraft. Boundaries will be sprayed from the air. Using the Healthy Forest Act, the Forest Service hopes to have all the blowdown timber not already in an established sale marked, estimated and sold by October.

In the meantime, crews are hard at work

in the pine where existing sales and their boundaries were known. The pine in this area is about 14-16 inches in diameter and are 89-90 feet tall. The area is a beehive of activity, with trucks coming and going and skidders and processors moving over the landscape at all points of the compass. Big piles of logs and pulpwood stick up above the almost prairie-like landscape. Another noticeable feature is the broken stubs left standing that contain merchantable timber. This is one of those things that remind us all of the job that the Forest Service has of making all of us at least a little bit happy. It seems that the environmental community wants these left for insects and woodpeckers. I had always heard about clearcuts so large that a woodpecker had to pack his lunch to fly over, and, happily, it appears that they won't have to pack a lunch in this clearcut. In addition, one acre in 20 will be allowed to lay and rot to make environmentalists happy. Fortunately, the loggers have the latitude to pick which acre and can leave the worst of the timber for the bugs.

According to Ruckheim, the pine areas will be replanted, and some of the areas that were mixed with aspen and red oak will be allowed to regenerate as Nature sees fit.

Having tens of thousands of cords hit the ground at a time when market conditions are extremely poor isn't very good news, but all loggers I talked to said that paper mills and sawmills are cooperating in trying to give this wood a priority to prevent as much waste due to spoilage as possible. If there is a good side to this situation, it has to be the work provided to logging contractors who might have been running on half-throttle with the poor market conditions.

Biewer Wisconsin Sawmill is the contract holder on some of the red pine sales in the Chequamegon-Nicolet that bore the brunt of the tornado. Biewer is trying to give priority to the pine, according to company forester Johnny Johnson. According to Johnson, all of the entities that use red pine are cooperating very well to buy and process the timber before the stain sets in. Johnson said Sawyer Lumber near Marquette, Michigan is purchasing some of the logs and Mosinee Paper and International Paper, both in central Wisconsin, are giving the blowdown wood priority in the marketplace.