

Tour Of Weaber Mill Reveals Importance Of Timber To Pennsylvania Economy

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receives, besides the larger, wholesale orders.

"You don't realize how much computers are used," said Robie. "The tools foresters have available are amazing. They can find property lines or pull up a map out on the site." He also pointed out the impact the wood scanners have had on increasing efficiency and thus competition in the industry.

"We export about four percent of our total production," said Weaber. This is a drastic change from the mid '80s, when we exported about 50 percent of our product. That was a conscious effort, especially since 1991, when we began to sell the value-added product for the 'do-it-yourself'er'. There's more than enough market to take care of our product," said Weaber of the home department outlet. "Besides, America's the number one consumer of wood products."

The Forest

From 1870-1910, colonists razed Pennsylvania's forests; prior to that the Native Americans had burned the forest. Consequently, today's forests are considered to be "even-aged," as they have all matured from the turn of the century. The species which make up Pennsylvania forests today are not necessarily the species which dotted the Pennsylvania countryside before the deforestation.

"The species we have now are not just younger versions of the forests cut down in 1800, which included softwoods and hemlocks," explained Robie. "When the earlier forests were cut down it created space for the shade-intolerant trees.

"If we let the forests go without any control we would see the shade-tolerant trees grow and take over the others. It's dynamic, it changes all the time. Timber harvesting interrupts

the process of succession. We can control how a forest grows." Today's market, said Robie, utilizes what is available, and the shade-intolerant trees such as poplar and ash thrive in the cleared or thinned areas of forest.

The Harvest

To illustrate timber harvesting from a small area, the group headed to a six-acre site which Weaber Inc. had harvested this past spring.

"A landowner can make money off a four or five-acre tract," said Pat Wood, who joined the tour from William J. Green & Associates. "People don't realize that."

At the site Weaber's chief forester Dennis Brehm described the thinning process which takes place several years before the larger, more comprehensive harvest. Trees which are of less value, such as Maple, may be cut to make room for the growth of neighboring higher-value trees. Trees that are left will have more room to grow so they'll grow faster, Brehm said. Eliminating these trees also prevents them from reseeding.

A few years after thinning, foresters will select the trees to take for the harvest. Foresters judge the size and quality of the trees to determine the number of board feet which the trees will yield before giving the owner an estimate. Weaber pays the owner per tree before the crew cuts the first tree. During the selection process, foresters determine tree health by looking at the bark and noting any swells or peeling which may reveal a rotten interior.

"You want to keep some of it so when you want to cut again they'll have nice trees to sell," said Brehm of the selection and harvesting process. "You want to keep the same quality woods or improve it." Typically, Weaber takes about 10 trees per

acre.

The landowner's goals help the foresters determine how many and which trees to cut. "This owner's objectives of harvesting timber, aesthetics, and wildlife are taken into consideration. If wildlife is important to the owner, and a tree has holes and doesn't have much value for our purposes, we'll leave it standing," said Brehm.

The crooked or too-slender tree-tops are chopped to get wood close to the ground. This method improves the aesthetics of the site, provides wildlife habitat, speeds the decomposition process, and protects saplings from deer. Brehm described stands of forests where clusters of regeneration took place around the protective tree-tops.

The stumps are taken to best conserve the lumber available. For instance six square board feet (one board foot is one foot square plus one inch thick) are lost for every one inch left as a stump. "The best lumber on any tree is the first off the stump, so you want your stump as close to the ground as possible," said Brehm.

Poplar and oak trees take approximately 60 years to reach their final height of 70-80 feet, with the heavier oaks weighing in at almost two tons apiece. They can, in fact, be harvested in 15 years.

"The longer they stand out there, the more goes wrong with them," Brehm said. "When they



The group observed the regrowth of trees in the cleared areas. Here Brehm points out the saplings which have grown since the thinning phase that was completed three years earlier.

get beyond their prime, they peak out. Disease, insects, rot, and defects decrease their value, or a windstorm comes and blows the trees over."

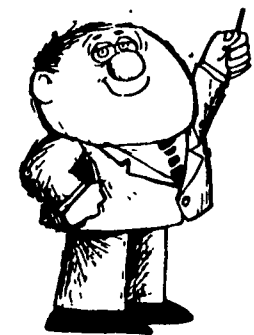
Since the area's trees will grow in naturally, Weaber does not have to place seedlings. "As long as you want to keep the same species, you don't have to replant. Nature can put things in there better then we can plant. If we'd put a seedling in we'd have to mulch and take care of it, but not if they're reseeded naturally. As soon as you cut and open up a clearing for some sun, all the seeds that have been sitting on the ground just take off," Brehm said.

Besides reseeding the grass, Weaber employs other conservation methods to slow water runoff. "Water bars," a mound of earth placed across the timber road, diverts water, and slows runoff down the slope.

Briars quickly join the reseeded grass in a cut area, which helps to hold the soil in place. The seeds, which have been on the ground waiting, will now receive sunlight, germinate, take root, and eventually shade out the briars.

Varying township regulations on logging are one of the challenges which face the industry. "The irony is that the townships

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