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UNH Sawmill Prepares To Meet 21st Century Challenges Of States Timber Industry
UNH Sawmill Prepares To Meet 21st Century Challenges Of State’s Timber Industry

Event Celebrated Renovation of 1968 Facility

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DURHAM, N.H. -- With no heat or running water and access only by dirt road, the University of New Hampshire’s Thompson School Sawmill is one of the university’s more distinctive laboratories. Yet since 1968, the barn-like structure has helped supply New Hampshire’s forest-products industry (the state’s third-largest industry) with qualified graduates of forestry programs in both the Thompson School of Applied Science (TSAS) and the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture (COLSA). Now, after nearly four decades of admirable but increasingly obsolete service, the sawmill will get a much-needed renovation.

A fundraising campaign to support the renovation is halfway to its $230,000 goal; the university will match these dollars from alumni and friends with an additional $100,000. In-kind donations of equipment and labor will finish the job of bringing the Sawmill up to 21st century standards. An event at the sawmill Oct. 6 celebrated the campaign’s success and its donors.

“It’s more than just a new place to cut up trees on campus,” said Don Quigley, TSAS professor of forest technology. “Everyone—our students but also the forest community and timber land owners—stands to benefit from watching these logs open up into boards and products.”

“There is a real need in the industry for a skilled and trained workforce,” said Jasen Stock, executive director of New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association, a lead donor to the renovation campaign. “If we're going to remain strong for the next 25 to 30 years, we need trained people who understand the technology and how to make square lumber from round logs.”

The majority of practicing forest professionals in New Hampshire, the nation’s second-most forested state, received training at one of UNH’s two forestry programs.

“Our students can learn the basics here, but modern safety standards have slipped past our technology,” Quigley said. Indeed, the rough-hewn pole barn structure houses a menacing-looking circular saw and a hand-set carriage.

The new mill will boast a band saw that will recover 12 percent more wood from a log than the existing saw; a heated classroom for not only UNH students but also industry groups, youth groups, and others; upgraded electric service; and running water and a septic system. “We’re going to have a sawmill that’s safe, that’s efficient, that we can be proud of. We’d like to be a little less quaint,” Quigley said.
For sawmill supporter Ross D’Elia, president and half-owner of Henniker-based sawmill HHP Inc., an investment in the sawmill’s future is an investment in HHP’s future. “The raw material is becoming more and more expensive. It’s incumbent on us to become more efficient in harvesting that wood and processing that wood,” D’Elia said. “To maintain our competitive edge, we have to reinvest in technology and equipment, and we have to have a workforce that can adapt to that.” D’Elia, who graduated from the Thompson School in 1976, has eight Thompson School alumni on his staff.

For Public Service of New Hampshire, another major supporter of the sawmill renovation project, “it’s yet another way for PSNH to continue to support the New Hampshire forestry industry,” said PSNH President and Chief Operating Officer Gary Long. Long added that supporting the sawmill renovation complements PSNH’s Northern Wood Power Project, which will replace a coal-fired boiler in Portsmouth with an environmentally friendly system that uses wood chips and other clean wood material for fuel.

While the sawmill produces boards as well as firewood and wood chips, its primary product is knowledge, Quigley said. “It’s a laboratory for sustainable practices in a very labor-intensive industry,” he said. “Tree utilization, tree health, lumber: All these things stand to benefit from cutting up trees.”

http://unhinfo.unh.edu/news/img/tsas/sawmill1.jpg (1.86MB)
At an event celebrating the renovation of the UNH Sawmill (Oct. 6), Don Quigley (left), professor of forest technology at the Thompson School of Applied Science, surveyed the 1968 facility with alumnus Ross D’Elia, president and half-owner of Henniker-based sawmill HHP Inc. and a supporter of the renovation.

http://unhinfo.unh.edu/news/img/tsas/sawmill2.jpg (1.70MB)
This circular saw, installed when the UNH Sawmill was built in 1968, will be replaced by a band saw that will recover 12 percent more wood from each log.