



White River's sawmill lines are white hot

Ontario's White River Forest Products sawmill is intent on being one of Canada's most efficient sawmills, and that effort recently received a \$15 million capital investment that will significantly boost production.

By Tony Kryzanowski

The quest to make White River Forest Products in north central Ontario one of Canada's most efficient sawmills continues, with the owners recently investing \$15 million at the sawmill infeed, in a new Comact saw line, and trimmer line modifications that will improve lumber production by nearly 50 percent.

Production is expected to increase from 110 million board feet to between 160 to 175 million board feet annually, with the Comact line replacing two existing lines. This is without increasing the amount of wood fibre processed through the sawmill, about 630,000 cubic metres annually.

The number of lines at the sawmill will decrease from three to two, but production will increase significantly owing in part to increased recovery and increased staffing. Production ramped up from one to two shifts in October 2014, which was planned when the sawmill reopened.

Located four hours north of Sault Ste. Marie, the sawmill was brought back to life in 2013 by forestry veteran and Tembec founder Frank Dottori and a group of investors that includes the Pic Mobert First Nation and Township of White River. The mill had been mothballed for six years

The First Nation and Township fought hard to keep the facility intact during the time it was idled, and convinced Dottori to become part of the investment group that restarted the mill—and he has been closely involved with management of the operation.

“We replaced our two random length lines with a high speed, random length Comact line equipped with the latest technology,” says Dottori, of the upgrades. “It has a production capacity of 40,000 board feet per hour, which is double what the old lines had.”

He says that within two weeks of when it started operations in October, the new line was already running at the same output as the two old lines.

Dottori, who also recently purchased the Chaleurs sawmill located near Bathurst, New Brunswick, with a group of investors, says he believes the White River sawmill has a great future. His goal is to use the Chaleurs sawmill, which is noted for being one of the most efficient sawmills in Canada, as a model for the White River sawmill as White River makes improvements to its lumber manufacturing processes. He says that even during



the downturn in the lumber market as a result of the housing crash in the U.S., the Chaleurs mill continued to produce lumber and make money. The goal is to put the White River sawmill on the same solid business footing, which has the added benefit of providing more certainty in the community, so that no matter what happens to lumber prices, mill jobs are more secure.

The White River sawmill has a lot going for it, says Dottori, including an excellent wood resource in both quality and proximity to the mill. The wood fibre is located within 100 to 120 kilometres of the mill.

To put the amount of recovery gain expected due to the new investment into perspective, Dottori says a typical eastern sawmill will produce about .9 tonnes of chips per thousand board feet produced. With the new line, they expect that to go down to below half a tonne per thousand board feet. Essentially, the sawmill will consume 30 per cent less wood per 1,000 board feet of lumber, and a lot of that is being accomplished through the use of new technology. For example, Dottori says there are 14 scanners on the Comact line aimed at optimizing recovery. But there is a trade-off. While they may be producing fewer chips, they are producing more side boards in the 1 X 4 to 2 X 3 range.

“There’s a break point there so you have to be careful,” Dottori says. “You get twice as much for lumber as you do for chips, but the question is, can you sell all that small lumber? We have a bit of a market demand issue here.”

The sawmill is the largest industry in White River. As a resource town, it is common for both a husband and wife to work at the facility. At present, they employ 146 workers, many who come from the Pic Mobert First Nation.

In addition to owning part of the sawmill, White River Forest Products has helped the Pic Mobert First Nation start a logging company called Magwayyawk Forestry Services (MFS), which is responsible for supplying the sawmill with 300,000 cubic metres of softwood annually. The company is a joint venture with the sawmill but is majority-owned by the Pic Mobert First Nation.

“It’s working very well and is currently supplying about 40 per cent of our wood,” says Dottori.

As part of the transition to the new, more efficient Comact line, White River Forest Products kept its HewSaw line for smaller diameter logs, which had only operated for about five years prior to the sawmill closure. At the time of the sawmill purchase in 2013, it was improved to what Dottori called 2013 standards, with the ability to process logs from a 4” to 8” diameter at twice the speed. This has also helped to improve recovery, with more lumber and less chip production.

Overall, the current capital expenditure at the sawmill begins at the infed.



“We’ve made improvements to the infeed to be able to supply the extra capacity that this new line requires,” says Dottori. This consists of modifying the infeed conveyors, installing two new Nicholson A5 debarkers, new feed bins, and a new conveyance system involving a Comact push log and step feeder.

The Comact processing line consists of a canter/quad and then a TPL3 profiler, leading to a discharge table. The TPL3 is a single-pass cant sawing and profiling device. Its purpose is to provide greater cant control throughout both the curved and straight sawing process, while minimizing the space between cants and eliminating returns to an edger.

The lumber accumulates on a new landing table and then proceeds through the existing trimmer line and bins. White River Forest Products is spending about \$500,000 to modify this area so that its capacity will increase by about 20 per cent, to avoid a bottleneck from the increased production from the Comact line.

An additional \$2.5 million will be spent over the next year to install a new dry kiln, again to take into account the extra production from the sawmill, and to upgrade the planer mill, such as installing an unstacker and improving the final product grading and packaging system. The company has already invested in a new VAB Solutions automated lumber grading system in the planer mill as well as a new machine stress rating (MSR) grader.

While Comact provided a lot of the installation on a turnkey basis, Quebec-based DWB Consulting Services also provided engineering and installation services on some of the capital project. JAMEC Inc. provided some mechanical installation work and EDI Electricque did the electrical work, both of Quebec.

The product output from the sawmill is not expected to change, as the mill continues to process primarily black spruce and jackpine logs in the 8” to 20” diameter range. About 70 per cent of production consists of 2 X 4 and 2 X 6 in 16’ lengths. However, they do expect a value uplift from the investment made at the sawmill.

“We expect that our lines will provide us with about a 10 per cent improvement in #2 and better,” says Dottori. “The quality of the lumber coming off this line so far is amazing. It almost looks like we don’t have to plane it.”

One of the challenges that White River Forest Products faces is finding enough employees. Dottori says resource communities like White River are still trying to bounce back from the severe downturn in the forest industry in 2008 when many sawmills, pulp mills and paper mills were shut down. White River was no exception, considering that the sawmill was closed for six years. The challenge now is to attract workers back to the community.

“We’re short of employees, and the problem is that because we are in a small community, there is no infrastructure,” says Dottori. “You can’t find a house or an apartment within 20 to 30 kilometres of White River to live. The sawmill is now bigger than the town, so to speak.”



The sawmill plans to approach the provincial government to see what can be done to assist the community to provide some sort of housing, so that they can operate with a full complement of employees.

The hope is that with the investments made in the sawmill, and its improved ability to survive a wood products downturn in future because of its efficiency, that financial institutions will make it easier for individuals wanting to move and build in the community, and construct homes on the lots that the town has available.