



TIMBER COMPANY RECEIVES ENERGY CONSERVATION REBATE CHECK

A Greener and More Efficient Plum Creek

By Myers Reece, 11-10-09

After so much dreariness for the Plum Creek Timber Co. over the past two years, it's a welcome relief for company officials to announce a bit of good news: a fruitful partnership with the Flathead Electric Cooperative and the Bonneville Power Administration.

A year ago, Plum Creek implemented an energy-conservation system at its medium-density fiberboard plant in Columbia Falls to cut down on power costs and reduce the facility's carbon footprint. The system is "essentially smart grid technology," said Tom Ray, vice president of Montana operations.



Caption: The \$9.5-million biofilter at Plum Creek's medium-density fiberboard plant in Columbia Falls was unveiled at the end of October last year. - File photo by Lido Vizzutti/Flathead Beacon

Now that the technology has been in place for a full year, Plum Creek qualifies for a \$337,000 check through a BPA rebate program. The money is a one-time rebate, but Ray said the long-term benefits are lower power costs, less energy use and a more efficient system of making boards at the plant.

To mechanically refine sawdust and woodchips in the board-making process "takes tremendous amounts of electricity," Ray said. The new system, with its advanced "computer optimization" capabilities, helps officials better monitor the ebbs and flows of voltage use, he said.

As the wood products industry continues to struggle, Ray said anything Plum Creek can do to stay competitive is vital.

"It's really a win-win situation for the partners here," Ray said. "We're able to get greener."

In the past year, Plum Creek has closed three of its Flathead facilities and laid off employees at other operations in the valley. Hundreds lost their jobs. The timber company reported heavy losses in 2008 and early 2009. The F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Co., based out of Columbia Falls, has also been hit hard by the declining lumber market.

Plum Creek permanently closed its Ksanka sawmill in March, dismantled the facility and then auctioned off its parts in May. Stoltze was among the companies that made purchases at the auction. Then in June, Plum Creek shut down its Pablo sawmill and its stud mill and remanufacturing plant in Evergreen. Officials hope to reopen the Evergreen plant in the future, Ray said. The Pablo mill has not been dismantled.

Today, Plum Creek has four facilities still operating in Montana: the medium-density fiberboard plant, an Evergreen plywood plant, a Columbia Falls plywood plant and a Columbia Falls sawmill.

Changes in the company's cost structure, as well as a slight improvement in the market, has enabled Plum Creek to operate those four facilities without any recent layoffs, Ray said. Outside of the Flathead, Plum Creek has one other plant, a lumber remanufacturing operation in Meridian, Idaho.

"The current employment configuration has been essentially the same over the past few months," Ray said.

Amid the decline, the medium-density fiberboard plant has managed to take a couple of progressive steps forward. Last October, a \$9.5 million biofilter was activated at the plant. The "bug farm," as it's called, is a high-tech system that houses approximately four trillion microscopic bacteria that clean the air of chemicals released during the manufacturing process. It's a pollution control mechanism that results in cleaner emissions.

At the time, Plum Creek officials said the biofilter was the largest of its kind in the world. It was the third for Plum Creek at its Montana operations. There is a similar system at the Evergreen plywood plant and another one at the fiberboard plant. Upon activation of the biofilter, Hank Ricklefs, vice president of northern resources and manufacturing, said the system would help the plant withstand the struggling wood products market.

The partnership with Flathead Electric and BPA is yet another forward-thinking effort designed to keep the fiberboard plant viable.

"We want to stay competitive and continue to run," Ray said. **[End of article]**

This article was printed from flatheadbeacon.com at the following URL: http://www.flatheadbeacon.com/articles/article/a_greener_and_more_efficient_plum_creek/14083/

© 2009 Flathead Beacon. All Rights Reserved.