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The Laconia Daily Sun

Kiln-dried firewood operation doubling capacity to meet demand

By Roger Amsden
Dec 15, 2011 12:00 am

BELMONT — A kiln-dried firewood operation which turns trees which had been standing in the woods on Monday into cut, split and dried wood by Friday is about to double its capacity in order to keep up with growing demand.

A second kiln will soon be going up at Province Road Kiln-Dried Firewood, which now turns out about 1,000 cords of wood a year and is so busy that all of its current production is already spoken for into February.

"We're going to double our production, provided we're able to get the wood to do that," says owner Mark Mooney, who says that he already has a second boiler on site and has poured a foundation for the new kiln and expects to start work soon on the new building.

Mooney says that some of the logs he uses come from his own wood lots but the bulk of them are supplied by local loggers., who have had trouble getting out into the woods this year due to wet conditions.

"It's been a difficult season. We had a wet spring and fall and loggers lost a lot of days out in the woods. A little while ago we ran out of logs altogether," says Mooney.

He said that the decision to build the kiln-dried firewood processing center came in the winter of 2007-08. Several years before that he had bought a wood-processing system and brought it to a sandpit at the former Province Road Sand and Gravel operation where maintenance workers from his Briarcrest Estates development were kept busy during the winter months by turning out firewood, as many as 400 cords per year.

"We'd been talking about doing something like this for quite some time. But that winter, when we were pulling firewood out from under 40 inches of snow, I decided we'd have to move the operation under cover," says Mooney.

So he built a large dome-like shelter for the processed firewood capable of holding as much as 600 cords and put up a large building with a kiln which can hold between 16 and 18 metal cage-like buckets filled with a cord apiece of loosely stacked processed firewood.

And he bought a new wood processor which takes whole logs: maple, beech, ash, and other hardwood species, and saws them into 16-inch chunks, which drop into a chute where a hydraulic ram pushes them into a four-way splitter. The split wood is then carried upwards by a conveyor belt which drops them into the metal cages, which are moved to a storage area once they are filled.

Heart of the system is a custom-built one million Btu wood-fired boiler which heats the kiln to between 180 and 200 degrees, reducing the moisture content of the wood from 54 percent to less than 20 percent in a three or four-day period.

Brian Hutchins, general manager of Province Road Kiln-Dried Firewood, says that the operation has become year-round and that the system actually works better during the summer months.

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"Drying time changes with the weather. In the winter it can take four or five days. The wood is frozen and you have to unthaw it to start driving the moisture out. Summer is the best time. You can put two loads a week through the system," says Hutchins.

He says that the boiler, which is fired by a scrap wood, has a propane backup and is in continuous 24-hour operation with a backup generator in case of power outages so that the heated water will continue to flow. The kiln itself has three giant fans near the roof which provide the exhaust needed for the moisture drawn from the wood, which is periodically released through vents near the roof.

Hutchins says that in the past he's tried to keep enough firewood in storage so that customers could drive in and pick up a small truckload to tide them through until a delivery could be made but that's proved nearly impossible this year due to the high demand.

"Log prices are going up too. There's a lot of demand for logs and with the wet weather for loggers it's been hard to keep enough of an inventory on hand to get the production up to where it should be." says Hutchins.

He says that he's hoping the logjam will break as winter sets in and frozen ground allows loggers to harvest enough trees to keep both of the kiln-dry units busy around the clock.

CAPTIONS

Brian Hutchins, general manager of Province Road Kiln-Dried Firewood, stands next to metal cages, each filled with a cord of wood, which will be turned into firewood after three or four days in a dry kiln. (Roger Amsden photo for the Laconia Daily Sun)

Brian Hutchins, general manager of Province Road Kiln-Dried Firewood, says the company intends to double its production in the coming months to keep up with demand. (Roger Amsden photo for the Laconia Daily Sun)

A metal cage filled with a cord of firewood is moved into the kiln at Province Road Kiln-Dried Firewood. (Roger Amsden photo for the Laconia Daily Sun)