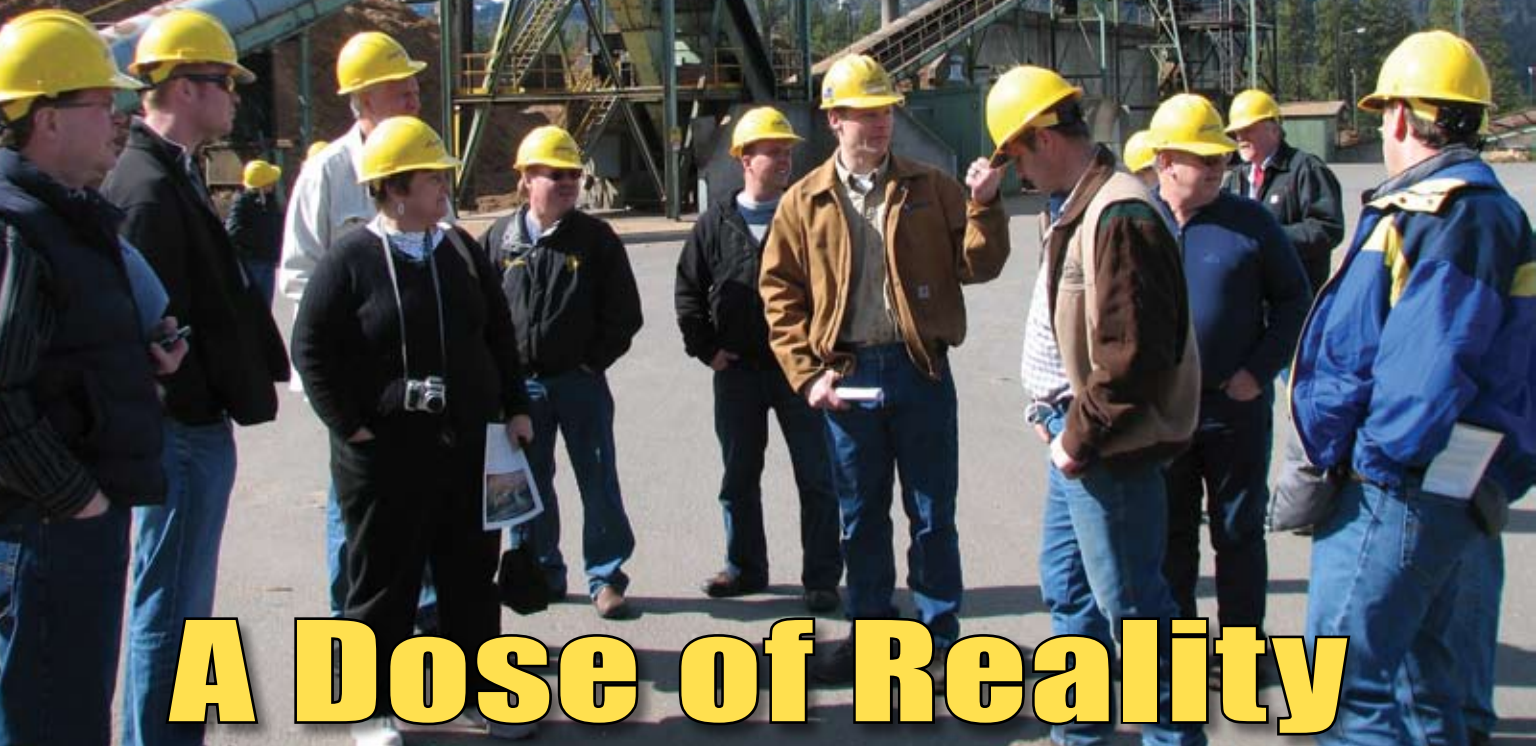




Small Log CONFERENCE 2009



A Dose of Reality and a Dose of Hope



By Barbara Coyner

The local press led off with the headline “Business, government try to turn slash into cash” as the fourth Small Log Conference met in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho on March 25-27. For 175 forest industry thinkers and doers, SLC delivered on its theme, “Living Locally, Surviving Globally,” providing a reality-check on small log and woody biomass utilization worldwide. Most agreed that forest-related industries have a definite role to play, but the devil’s in the details.

Hammered by decreased housing starts, climate change uncertainty, alternative energy needs and declining forest health, SLC ‘09 participants turned into an international think tank. Exploring all angles, from woody biomass energy, to technology, to

partnerships, attendees from the U.S., Canada, Finland and Estonia networked, questioned and brainstormed.

They even enjoyed some bluesy tunes from Chuck Leavell, keyboardist for the Rolling Stones, who owns a 2,500-acre tree plantation in Georgia. Leavell and his wife Rose Lane were chosen National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year in 1999.

Carlton Owen, head of the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, summed up conditions as the conference came to a close. “These are truly unprecedented times and the challenges are great. Thank you for staying positive.”

In synthesizing conference presentations, Owen advocated a Manhattan Project approach to forest industry dilemmas. “We could improve American forest health using biotechnology,”

he said, linking science and technology with issues of climate change, food and fiber, alternative energy, and green building materials. "I like to call myself an environmental capitalist. We have the best product and we should be energized about our future. Each day we are one day closer to recovery."

During the conference and pre-conference tour, common questions arose. Does the country use small diameter logs and slash for building materials or woody biomass energy? How does industry stay viable and profitable while trying to reestablish healthy forests in a roller coaster economy? And who gets the wood when new markets compete with established markets?

Conference Tours

The pre-conference tour to Avista's woody biomass power plant in Kettle Falls, Washington, and Vaagen Brothers Lumber in Colville, provided ideal contrasts for utilization options. The 25-year-old Avista plant proved that wastewood from forest thinnings furnishes reliable energy. But the plant also illustrated some pitfalls.

"When we first started up, we could get our wood within a 50-mile radius, but now we're going 200 miles out," fuels manager Ron Gray said, noting the plant often depends on Canadian wood. Gray admitted the wood supply gets wobbly when area mills shut down.

HewSaw, a major sponsor of the conference since its debut in 2004, demonstrated its small log handling capabilities during the Vaagen Brothers Lumber tour. Ed Mayer, President of HewSaw in North America, explained the technology, noting, "This is really a 'cut-to-value' approach in which we merchandise each

log for best value. Data is provided through scanning and that determines best value." Mayer said the goal is reliability, productivity and profitability, a tough challenge with small logs because of sheer numbers. Vaagen uses a 128-foot high portal crane to deal with small log sorting and inventory.

Technology on Display

The Suppliers Showcase exhibited the wide variety of technology already available for handling woody biomass and small logs. Comact, back for a second time as a sponsor, touted examples of its log handling technology, which is at work in several North American sawmills. And major sponsor Rawlings Manufacturing of Missoula, ranked as the industry standard for hog grinders and wastewood solutions, also exhibited time-tested equipment options.

Additionally, slash bundlers, harvesters, biomass heads and optimizers were profiled, as well as accessories and ideas for small log utilization, community development and networking. Adam Corfe of Endeavor Equipment in Grande Prairie, Alberta, promoted new woody biomass heads based on the SliceSaw cutting system. A newcomer to the conference, Corfe said he'd gotten several solid leads. The Forest Products Lab in Madison, Wisconsin played a role, as well, with its biomass education exhibit displaying the latest small-wood research.



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Conference producer TimberBuySell's director Craig Rawlings worked with conference manager Jan Raulin to target what Raulin regarded as "the best in the industry." As Rawlings commented, "I heard over and over from conference participants how impressed they were with the diversity of the sponsors, delegates, and speakers, and how well the agenda aligned with the audience. We covered everything from land management, harvesting, and in-woods processing, to transportation, primary manufacturing, existing markets and emerging markets like cellulosic ethanol made from wood."

Rosalie Cates, head of Montana Community Development Corporation and the overseer of TimberBuySell, fully supported the company's involvement. "We took over the conference because it ideally fits our mission at MCDC," she said.

Timely Topics

Wood supply emerged as a main topic throughout the conference. Dr. Kurt Mackes of Colorado State University and D. Wayne Clogg of West Fraser Timber Company in British

Columbia both talked about the dead and dying pine forests in Canada and Colorado. The beetle kill is so vast that not all forests can be treated, they said, leaving wide swaths of forests for wildfire to consume.

Mackes said two pellet mills are addressing beetle kill in Colorado's Grand County, which has an 80 percent mortality rate in its pine forests. In Canada, meanwhile, West Fraser is running several mills, trying to keep up with the beetle kill there. Blue stain makes the window of opportunity for cutting lumber two years or less, but decreased demand for lumber creates little incentive to churn out 2 x 4's. "You can't lose your infrastructure," Mackes stressed in the catch-22 scenario. He explained that dying forests offer only a five to seven-year window for making OSB and pellets, and a 10-year window for making biomass power.

Despite pressing forest health needs, land managers still wrestle with obstacles such as public perceptions. Yet stewardship projects and collaboration are making slow inroads. For example, Al Christopherson of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation said his organization has advanced from "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) to IMBY, involving diverse

stakeholders in land management activities. The Missoula-based foundation has initiated stewardship contracts with the Forest Service and BLM.

The real collaboration story came from another conference sponsor, Dwayne Walker of Future Forests LLC in Arizona. Involved in the White Mountain Stewardship Project since 2004, Walker contracted through the Forest Service take out small logs and biomass after wildfire decimated the Southwest forestlands. "If there had been no collaboration, you'd have been looking at wildfire scars the rest of your life," he said. The project brought 250 new jobs, a pellet manufacturer and forest health improvements.

Parting Words

"We've all been to more than our fair share of conferences," Owen said during the conference wrap-up. "Perhaps one characteristic that distinguishes this session from others is the pervasive nature of speakers and attendees who seem to all be looking for ways to build a brighter future rather than spend time assigning blame and complaining. I want to express my appreciation to all for doing so. I don't need any more reminders of how tough times are." **TW**