



Rex Lumber Has Room To Grow



Rex Lumber in Troy is expanding and investing in technology that will make the lumber mill's infrastructure faster and smarter. It's a natural move for the company, which opened its Troy mill in 2019.

Rex Lumber is growing — again. The company, founded in 1926 by W.D. McRae, opened its fourth location in Troy in 2019 and is undergoing a \$21 million expansion slated to finish late next year.

The mill, now 170 employees strong, is a welcome addition to a community rich with natural resources.

"Rex Lumber is a fantastic match for Pike County," said Chase Cobb, president of the Pike County Economic Development Corporation. "We're in the Pine Belt. We have a diverse manufacturing base across the industrial spectrum, so Rex is a great fit."

Building A Legacy

The company operates sawmills in Graceville and Bristol, Florida. In 2009, it added a third mill in Brookhaven, Mississippi.

The Troy mill was built on 300 acres in north Pike County. The 148,000-square-foot building and initial investment was over \$120 million.

Growing Strong

Rex Lumber depends on south Alabama and surrounding areas for natural resources necessary to create its products. The company buys local timber from loggers, wood dealers and landowners. The



mill removes the bark from the log, which is then converted into lumber. State-of-the-art equipment throughout the operation creates a seamless, efficient process.

"That's the Rex Lumber way," said Troy General Manager Jason Gullede. "Our owners realize you have to invest back into the company and stay with the times and technology to stay afloat."

Rex Lumber's equipment and construction partner is The BID Group, a Canadian company responsible for about a dozen similar facilities. Gullede is confident BID can make Rex Lumber's existing technology faster and smarter.

"We're about to get into some artificial intelligence technology that's pretty new," he said. "There are only a few mills out there running that right now, so we're excited for that to show up."

Ample timberland was a draw of expanding in Troy, said Caroline Dautzat, whose family owns the company.

Sawmills generally procure their timber from within a 60- to 80-mile radius of the mill. And Troy has a healthy supply of nearby timber.

"You want people managing their trees properly and replanting for a healthy forest," she said. "When you have a healthy forest products market, people manage their timber better and keep trees growing."

Strong Footing

Lumber price increases over the last year provide a strong footing to make the new expansion profitable, Dautzat said.

"We're a commodity market, and in this country, people can forget that," Dautzat said. "But just like the price of oil changes, our prices change from week to week."

Building A Workforce

Timber wasn't the only resource that made Troy attractive to Rex Lumber. Employee training through AIDT, a state agency established to recruit and train workers, also helped distinguish the area.

Relatively few potential employees had previous sawmill training, but Rex Lumber leaders were pleased by how many locals had manufacturing experience.

"Alabama is wonderful to work with as far as bringing new businesses to the state," Dautzat said. "They offered significant incentives to come here."

PowerSouth Energy Cooperative, South Alabama Electric Cooperative's wholesale power provider, built a new substation nearby to serve the added electric load for Rex Lumber.

Rex's manufacturing schedule is unique in the area. The mill runs 16 hours a day, while its dry kilns run 24 hours a day with maintenance around the clock.

"This job's hot when it's hot and cold when it's cold," Gullede said. "It's a tough environment, and it's not for everybody. You have to be willing to stay in there and learn it. It's tough to find those people."

As a result, the company represents an opportunity for those looking for steady employment, particularly those skilled in equipment maintenance.

"We'll never say we're not looking (for help)," Dautzat said. ■

This story first appeared in Alabama Living magazine.

ATFA Members,

I hope each of you is well! It's been a uniquely successful year for the association, with many members working on new programs while existing programs adapt to COVID-19 restrictions. Most counties have been unable to host field days or Classroom in the Forest, but that hasn't stopped members from furthering our mission — to promote, educate and improve. Rather than put activities on pause, we've had an opportunity to grow and adapt to help the state's landowners and natural resource professionals.

Many chapters, like Sumter County, have continued to grow and offer excellent educational programming through online courses. Recently, Sumter County hosted a presentation and question-and-answer over Zoom with Jeff Wright with NCX (formerly SilvaTerra), a carbon credit exchange company that offers single-year contracts to landowners for sequestered carbon. Additionally, the state association allocated funds to partner with Alabama Extension to purchase a custom utility terrain vehicle (UTV) to better accommodate Alabamians with disabilities. This UTV will ensure any neighbors who would like to participate in a forestry field day can do so comfortably.

I'm excited to see many of you at the 2021 Alabama Landowners Conference in October. The conference is a joint venture among the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association, Alabama Tree Farm Committee and Alabama Natural Resources Council. It combines our annual meeting and the Natural Resources Symposium & Awards Banquet. On page 4, you'll find more information, including how to register. Thanks to everyone who has donated items to the silent auction. By getting local businesses involved, you've created a great relationship with the community, association and future students the auction supports. To donate an item, contact me at (334) 612-5235, or call your local director.

These interesting times have presented a great opportunity for the association to grow and change how it serves members. I appreciate what you each bring to this organization. If you have questions or suggestions about past or future educational programs, liability insurance or the TREASURE Forest Certification process, don't hesitate to reach out.

William Green
Executive Director

In It For The Long Haul

For the slow-growing white oak, time is never of the essence.

Fortunately for sportsmen, wildlife and industries that prize the tree, the White Oak Initiative isn't operating at a snail's pace. Formed in 2017 by Dr. Jeffrey Stringer of the American Forest Foundation, the initiative includes businesses, trade associations, conservation organizations, government agencies, universities and nonprofits working to ensure long-term sustainability of white oak-dominated forests.

Existing inventories are satisfying industry demand, but if current trends continue, businesses could experience shortages in 10-20 years, a major problem given the central role of white oak in many rural economies.

"We're over cutting our high-quality stands," Stringer said. "There's still plenty of volume out there, but it can't go on forever."

Saplings devote energy to developing a robust root system, but conservative growth allows trees of lesser value and invasive species to overtop them, thwarting progress.

White oak takes 50 years or more to reach maturity, only then producing the large crops of nutrient-dense acorns that fill bellies of countless critters. White oaks that thrive live 200 to 300 years.

Even then, white oak plays the long game. Last year, Kentucky bourbon distilleries filled 2.1 million charred white oak barrels with bourbon. To qualify as straight bourbon, those barrels must sit idle at least two years.

Other trees end up as flooring or veneer for furniture, allowing them to stick around for decades.

Hardwood Heavyweights

Several factors helped white oak dominate America's hardwood forests, including the American chestnut blight, a fungus that killed an estimated 4 billion American chestnut trees in the U.S. early in the 20th century. White oak thrived in its absence.

Other trends started earlier. Indigenous groups and early settlers used fire to clear pastures and manage undergrowth. Later, steam locomotives spewing sparks led to frequent forest fires.

"Oak likes that type of disturbance," Stringer said. "It can sprout back really well once it has big, developed root systems, so if a fire rolls through, the oak readily sprouts. Some of the thin-bark species that compete with oak, like maple and beech, are fire-susceptible, so periodic burning contributed to competing species diminishing."

Since fire has been largely removed from the forest-management toolbox, that trend reversed. Fast-growing species shade out oak regeneration, so selectively harvesting competing species and

letting sunlight hit the forest floor is central to regenerating white oak.



Creating The Initiative

To address this long-term issue, Stringer conducted a sustainability conference in 2015. A chance meeting with McCauley Adams, brand manager for her family's Brown-Forman Corp., led to forming the White Oak Initiative in 2017.

Brown-Forman Corp. manufactures popular brands of bourbon and Tennessee whiskey and owns two cooperages that make white oak barrels.

"We cannot make Tennessee whiskey or bourbon without white oak," Adams said. "We're constantly looking at models, trying to figure out exactly how long this resource is going to last us and how to get the highest-quality product in the most environmentally sustainable way."

A Comprehensive Plan

White Oak Initiative partners recently completed an assessment, including two spatial analyses of the white oak range, which stretches from Maine to Florida and as far west as Minnesota and eastern Texas. They identified areas with the best ecological conditions for white oak regeneration and areas where regeneration is most needed. Invasive species and deer populations were a major factor.

The second analysis factored in mills providing a market for white oak timber, competing species, landownership patterns, current conservation work and a high concentration of consulting foresters.

While white oak remains prominent across the eastern U.S., forests are aging. About 75% of the stands are classified as "mature or older." Dying young white oak stands means there isn't enough diversity in terms of age classes.

Since private landowners own most eastern forested acres, engaging these landowners in the initiative is key. Aesthetics of managing forests for white oak is another obstacle. For oak seedlings to regenerate, they need large canopy openings so sunlight can hit the ground, and some landowners prefer a closed canopy.

The plan calls for state and federal policies to promote research and advance conservation on private and public lands. It also outlines a communication strategy to build support, push legislators to act and reach stakeholders.

"We have incredibly committed members, we're bringing competitors together for a greater good, and we have been able to influence policy at the state and federal level," Adams said. "It really is amazing to see how well this group has come together." ■

Courtesy: American Forest Foundation



FALL PREP WORK

It's difficult, if not impossible, to establish successful food plots without planning and adequate soil preparation. Planting quality food plots may span several months, not a weekend.

Several factors influence success. This includes establishing a plan; guaranteeing proper soil fertility and pH; ensuring hardpan does not exist; preparing a firm, smooth seed bed; planting during favorable conditions; and controlling weeds.

Fall Planting Tips

- Test soil early and apply required lime. Do this at least 6 months before planting because the chemical process takes time to effectively change soil pH. If you didn't lime in spring or early summer, apply now — better late than never.
- Use soil test results to create the best fertilizer blend for specific soil needs. Many use balanced fertilizers because they are easy. However, it's well worth the time to custom blend fertilizer to match specific needs. Applying a balanced fertilizer often requires applying high amounts of some nutrients to compensate for lack of others in the soil.
- Order seed and fertilizer as early as possible. This ensures it's ready when you are.
- Make sure plots are relatively smooth. This should be done well ahead of planting dates. If broadcast planting, drag the field just before planting to loosen soil to provide good seed-soil contact. Once broadcasted, culti-pack the field to "mash" seed into the soil. Do not drag food plots if they are somewhat un-smooth or if you planted small seed such as clover. Dragging buries seeds too deep.
- Have seed beds ready, but don't plant too early. September is often dry. Mid-October is ideal in most of the Southeast with regular cold fronts that bring rain. Planting too early results in pests (mostly armyworms) or poor planting success due to drought. With early planting and adequate rain, the food plot could be knee high and less attractive to deer by hunting season.
- Add annual reseeding clovers such as crimson or arrowleaf into fall plantings. This will increase the quality, nutritional value and longevity of food plots. With proper management, these clovers produce food well into



summer then regenerate next fall.

- Use exclusion cages to monitor deer use and plot performance. An exclusion cage is a small tube of fence staked to the plot that prevents deer from eating the crop within that area. This allows proper assessment of plot growth and deer use. Cages are normally 2-3 feet in diameter and 3-4 feet tall.

Service Equipment

Late summer and early fall are great times to perform routine maintenance, repairs or service for tractors, all-terrain vehicles and other equipment. Develop a maintenance sheet that includes all equipment and records of service. This ensures equipment is taken care of and will be in good working order for fall activities. Don't forget about tractor implements such as grain drills, mowers or harrows. A maintenance sheet could include small tools like string trimmers and pressure washers. Preventative maintenance saves time and money.

Install Trail Cameras

Depending on where property is in the whitetail range, antler hardening (shedding of velvet) has already taken place or will shortly. This is a great time to begin installing trail cameras. During this period,

bucks are congregated in loose bachelor groups, so you can photograph multiple bucks together.

Placing the cameras depends on local food sources and deer activity. In some cases, attracting deer to a camera site with scattered whole corn is most effective. However, mineral licks created earlier in the year often make great camera locations, particularly if wet conditions were prevalent. Other effective locations include entrance trails to large agricultural fields or along the edge of smaller food plots of perennial crops, summer food plots or small water holes.

Most hunters are anxious and excited to plug the SD card into a computer and run through photos to see what bucks they have. Take time afterward to analyze the photos. By counting the number of bucks and does in the photographs, it gives an idea of the existing adult sex ratio, which helps make harvest decisions. Estimating the age of bucks sheds light on the buck age structure. A full-scale camera survey provides the most accurate and comprehensive information, but random trail camera photos can help you better understand the status of the deer herd.

This allows better management decisions that lead to desired results. Photos also help reduce "mistakes" when judging bucks from a deer stand, where judgments are often made in seconds while your heart is racing 200 beats per minute! ■

PROTECT, SUSTAIN, EDUCATE: KEYS OF THE ALABAMA FORESTRY COMMISSION

By Cole Sikes, Alabama Forestry Commission

The mission of the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) is three-fold: protect, sustain, educate. It's a mission the state agency, governed by a seven-member board, has channeled since its creation in 1924.

AFC protects forests from wildfires, insects, diseases and harmful agents; helps landowners sustain responsible forest management using professional technical assistance; and educates the public about the value of forests in ensuring a healthy economy and environment.

AFC employees are crucial to emergency response efforts, too, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beginning in March 2020, AFC provided Incident Management Planning, Safety and Logistics support to Alabama's Unified Command For COVID-19 Response. AFC worked alongside the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH), Alabama Emergency Management Agency and Alabama National Guard.

From March 13-Dec. 18, 2020 duties included inventory tracking at ADPH warehouses and transporting medical supplies. Four to six drivers traveled the state each week – ultimately totaling 700,000-plus miles – delivering crucial medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) to hospitals, nursing homes and other facilities. AFC committed 22,770 man hours toward COVID-19 deliveries.

AFC delivered 28.4 million medical items during the efforts. That included 340,000 hand sanitizer bottles; 38,500 containers of disinfectant wipes; 1,600 bottles of bleach; 10 million surgical masks; 1.9 million N95 masks; 1 million KN95 masks; 831,000 cloth masks; 8,000 Lysol cans; 1.1 million face shields; 12,000 disinfectant sprays; 1.9 million surgical gowns; 7,800 biohazard kits; 10.6 million latex gloves; 5,200 PPE kits; 1,100 coveralls; 110,000 boot covers; and 5,000 thermometers.

While continuing its COVID-19 response and daily responsibilities helping landowners, AFC staff were called to action last



Alabama Forestry Commission staff members were vital in delivering personal protection equipment and much-needed health care supplies to medical centers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

fall. Staff routinely help with emergency responses following disasters, including Hurricanes Sally and Zeta, which devastated parts of Alabama.

Employees help clear roads using chainsaw teams; transport people, equipment and supplies; and work emergency management centers across Alabama.

As the state recovers from a rocky 2020, AFC has a new mission to assist Alabamians.

Earlier this year, Gov. Kay Ivey and the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (RESTORE Council) granted \$10 million to AFC for Enhancing Gulf Waters Through Forested Watershed Restoration. This program will support the primary RESTORE Comprehensive Plan goal to improve water quality and quantity after the Deepwater Horizon disaster of 2010.

To learn more, visit forestry.alabama.gov. ■



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THE ALABAMA TREASURE FOREST ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER is published by the Alabama Farmers Federation, a member of the American Farm Bureau Federation. Correspondence may be addressed to **ATFA NEWSLETTER**, William Green, Editor, P.O. Box 11000, Montgomery, AL 36191-0001.