

ELECTRONIC KNOTHOLE NEWS

WASHINGTON ALDER MILL TOUR

MOUNT VERNON

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Dick Tinney wants your alder, and will try to convince you to plant even more.

“We will take as much as you can grow,” the president and CEO of Washington Alder told those attending a luncheon following a tour of the company’s mill on Farm to Market Road west of Mount Vernon.

The tour was hosted by Washington State University Extension, the Upper Puget Sound chapter of the Washington Farm Forestry Association, the state Department of Natural Resources and Washington Alder.

Besides the Mount Vernon plant, Washington Alder has mills in Chehalis (as Cascade Hardwood) and Port Angeles. The company is 8 years old.

Tinney said he expected Washington Alder to handle about 160 million board of logs this year, most of it red alder. He said that volume makes the company the second-largest producer of hardwood lumber in the United States. Eighty percent of that production is sold in the U.S.

The company has 450 employees in its three mills, with an annual payroll of \$40 million, he said. The average wage is \$19 an hour. “We try to attract family people,” he said, and pay them a living wage. “Turnover is small.”

Tinney said the company has tried to be innovative to assure there will be a future market for alder, which was viewed historically as a weed with little value. He said one product that Washington Alder has worked with Weyerhaeuser to produce is rustic alder for use in cabinets.

Dick Whitmore, log buyer for the mill, also urged tree farmers attending to plant alder. He said an ideal site might produce a mature crop in as little as 15 years, but 25 to 30 years is more realistic. He said alder likes sites ideal for Douglas fir, and will provide a better economical return than D. fir.

The best plantation sites are those where vegetation can be controlled, by chemical and mechanical means, Whitmore said. He advised planting at 550 to 600 stems per acre, with pruning twice, after 5 to 7 years each time.

He said his company would pay premium prices for plantation grown alder, but that natural alder would also respond well to thinning. He said growers should favor nursery stock—making sure the seedlings have been inoculated with rhizomes for a quick start in growth—over simply allowing natural stock to revegetate.

The mill tour was limited to 75 people, and appeared to be fully attended.

Andy Perleberg, WSU educational extension agent, spearheaded the effort to make the tour a reality, and hosted the luncheon.

The tour of the mill was broken into three categories—log yard, the mill itself, and the finishing area.

Jim Kallio, of Pacific Rim Log Scaling Bureau, had set out a variety of logs before the tour started, including maple, alder, birch and wild cherry—all logs the mill accepts. Whitmore said that Kallio is not employed by the mill, but is a third-party

employee with an impartial view toward a log. ``It's important that the log buyer and the log seller are happy'' with the scaling, he said.

Kallio described how staining, seams, cracks, breaks, rot, scars, splits, delamination, knots, holes, processor breaks, crooks and other flaws can affect the value of the logs.

Kallio said care of the log begins in the woods. ``The guy with the chain saw makes you or breaks you,'' he said. He also noted that processor operation is important, since gripping teeth on such a piece of equipment can make deep marks in the wood. He also noted that alder has a short shelf life in summer and the sooner the log gets to the mill, the better.

In the mill, logs were debarked and sent through a series of saws to be cut into a variety of dimensions. All of the log is used, even the bark.

In the finishing area, the lumber is stacked and sent through the 180-degree kiln, then graded. Jeff Carr, in the mill's sales department, said there are 17 grades in alder, with the top grade—Superior—bringing \$2,000 for 1,000 board feet.

The general hierarchy in grading, he said, is Superior, Cabinet, Custom Shop, Commercial Shop and No. 3. There are grades within each of those categories.

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For more information on Washington Alder LLC and Cascade Hardwood LLC, visit www.washingtonalder.org and www.cascadehardwood.com. Of the two sites, Cascade Hardwood's is more complete.

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