

September October, 2004

THE URBAN TIMBER CRUSADE

Pacific Coast Lumber is just one example of sawmill owners cashing in on waste wood

By Nikki Nichols



Debris removal for recycling and waste diversion.

Staggering is perhaps the only way you can describe the amount of lumber hauled to landfills every year — lumber that is oftentimes not just useable, but quite exquisite. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service reports that 3.8 billion board feet of lumber and landscape residue are generated every year. That's nearly 30 percent of the hardwood lumber produced annually in the United States. The good news is trees, being a renewable resource, will continue to grow. The bad news is, trees downed in storms, scorched in fires, smaller diameter underbrush in fire zones, insect-infested trees, and trees that simply grow old and die—they get a bad rap. Many home and property owners would just as soon have someone haul away the tree log and limbs and burn it all, rather than try to figure out a use for it. Trees with limitless potential are doomed to a bleak and unnecessary future as mulch or firewood.

Tree Crusaders

There is, however, a strong and growing army of tree crusaders — a new group that bridges the gap between the ultra-protective environmentalists, and the loggers trying to meet America's growing appetite for wood fiber. This group recognizes the potential of these trees, and also recognizes that landfills are getting too crowded to handle the loads coming in. These urban tree movements are gaining momentum as a new way to recycle. In other words, why cut down trees or import rare species, when often what you want is sitting in your backyard? The new urban tree landscape is dotted with stories of positive change in the effort not to let these valuable resources go to waste.



James Todd



Don Seawater



David Brannon

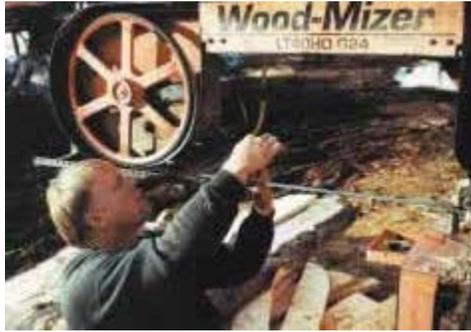
Pacific Coast Lumber Takes on Small Wood

One shining example is Don Seawater and partners, of San Luis Obispo, Calif. Seawater owns and operates Pacific Coast Lumber. Before starting the company, Seawater worked for more than 20 years in many roles in the lumber industry. During that time, he owned and operated two retail lumberyards. A major turning point came for Seawater when the commercial lumber market became cutthroat, and his own businesses started to falter. In this time of great strain, Seawater had borrowed a Wood-Mizer LT30 bandmill and sawed quite a few logs, coming face to face with the well-documented efficiency of thinner kerf saw blades. By 1996, he owned his own new Wood-Mizer LT40 Hydraulic portable band sawmill. Thanks to a technical assistance grant from the San Luis Obispo County Integrated Waste Management Authority, he bought a small but efficient crane truck. A second grant eventually came along to fund the purchase of a dry kiln. The California Department of Forestry also contributed substantial help.

What warranted the grants from the eco-conscious California government was the fact that Seawater, with his vast knowledge of wood species and millwork, was able to perform a great community service. He was able to take a resource that was about to be wasted, and produce items of heirloom status, all while running a full-service wood products business. The root of Seawater's company, Pacific Coast Lumber, is the term "green building." "Urban forest materials are essentially waste products, and our job is to divert those materials from landfills and from less useful end uses and put them back to work. So it is considered a recycling program," says Seawater.

Effective Tools and Lots of Lumber

Pacific Coast Lumber equipment, in addition to sawmill, includes an International crane truck (8,000 lb.), a Nyle dry kiln, a Toyota 9,000 lb. forklift, and a complete array of basic woodworking machines. Using this equipment, Seawater and his fourperson team are able to retrieve felled logs from offroad destinations, or simply from a person's backyard. "Arborists, homeowners, and everyone in between, are enjoying re-using their trees. It's quite a craze out here," says Seawater. Seawater said he's collecting between 250,000 and 400,000 board feet of lumber per year. Remarkably, much of the time he is paid to remove this waste material from properties. Also quite remarkable is the variety and volume of high grade, non-standard materials, which includes an amazing variety of highly sought-after species. "We get silk oaks, acacia, Monterey cypress, and species transplanted from other areas of the world," Seawater says. "It's just a true rainbow of species, and incredibly fun and satisfying." He adds, "There are really serious values for and some great profit potential for many of the more exotic woods such as figured acacia, claro walnut, and others."



Don adjusting Mill.

Distinctive Products

Pacific Coast Lumber produces very unique products with the lumber collected, often products that come with non-standard length dimensional lumber. Seawater, serving as the primary sawyer, has sawed material for community restoration projects. The company also sells Adirondack chair kits. But perhaps the most popular item is the Pacific Coast retreat house, which comes in several different designs. The small cabins serve as unique hideaways on wilderness property. Other retreat houses take on the form of garden sheds, playhouses, and outhouses. The most unique feature on these relaxation houses is the siding. "The siding is really interesting," Seawater says. "It's just a simple slab cut with a straight edge. We can sequence match work, we can vary the thicknesses, and it's just a beautiful product." Beauty and practicality often merge when Seawater is at work. "As far as I am concerned, the effort has to do with viability as a real, useable, practical product. Something that performs as well as anything else." Seawater, on occasion, will venture to the forested areas of California and purge the area of smaller diameter fuel sources, and use tiny logs, as little as four inches in diameter, for knee braces and poles for the retreat houses, providing another important service in the effort to clear forest beds of young fuel sources.

Part of a Bigger Effort

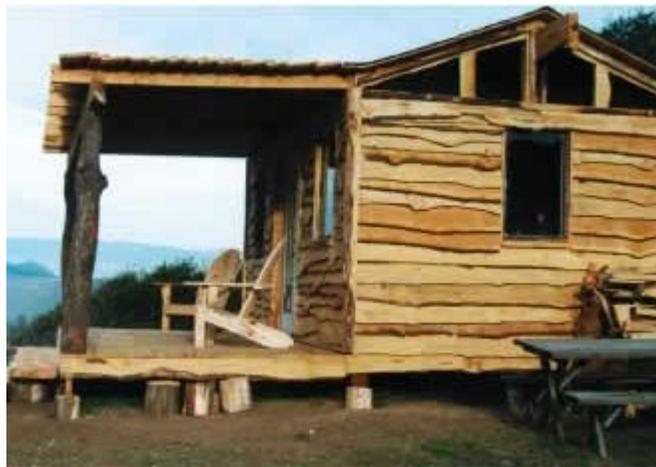
Seawater is in good company in his effort to put waste wood to good and proper use. The California Department of Forestry has purchased several portable band sawmills, and loans them out to communities with a particular need in the effort to sustain urban wood. The mills are also used in workshops on value-added products for urban trees. Seawater helps conduct some of the wood products seminars for the CDF. In Anaheim, Calif., West Coast Arborists, a tree care company with 350 employees, uses a portable hydraulic sawmill to cut municipal lumber for later sale to woodworking schools, school industrial arts programs, and for use in park benches and other projects, among other things.



Above: Dried lumber in our dry kiln
Right: 10'x14' retreat at peace.

The list goes on, but the goal is the same from each participant. Seawater is passionate about that goal. "There is in excess of 40 million board feet that is attrition-related material in California alone," Seawater says. "That figure doesn't include private industry. It gives you a feel for this type of material. It gives you an idea of the cost of waste, and to give an opportunity for people who appreciate wood and know what to do with it." Seawater, in his quest to salvage unwanted timber, is able to point directly at the Wood-Mizer sawmill as bringing him a certain measure of success.

He likes the unique cantilevered design, which other mill companies have shied from since it debuted on Wood-Mizer mills more than 20 years ago. "The single mast makes the Wood-Mizer a tremendous amount more versatile. Two masts restrict many of the logs that have size, sweep, or bumps dramatically in the area that's just out of range of the typical bandmill throat size. So when you throw a log on here and it has a little bump on the side and you're trying to make starting cuts in, it's so much harder to do than with a monorail design." Thanks to his hardworking team Seawater said he's flourishing after five years in business. Most importantly, he's doing his part to prevent trees from going to unnecessary waste. "I really love the fact that we're finding other uses for wood that used to go in landfills. I look at this as a very timely and practical solution. The more people who learn about the end uses for this lumber, then the more market there is, and the more possible sales there are. We promote that."



TW