

Innovation creates new Moricetown mill

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Standing dead dry balsam trees might not sound appealing as a potential overseas product, but it turns out they make great 'dragon bones' in China.

Seaton Forest Products is about a month into operations with a new sawmill west of Moricetown to ship squared balsam timber to market in China.

"We send (timber) packages, and they break them down into all sorts of things primarily used in construction for what they call dragon bones," said Andy Thompson, co-owner of the new mill.

"What that is, basically, is wooden strips, one-inch by two-inches. They have all these highrise apartment buildings in China made from concrete, and they line

them with this 'dragon bone' so they can put drywall on it."

The new sawmill sent its first truckload to China via Prince Rupert in June, and is averaging three or four trucks a day. The mill employs 12 people from Moricetown, Hazelton and Smithers, cutting logs considered small- to medium-sized in diameter. Construction is continuing with the installation of a new head rig designed to tackle oversize logs. When the head rig is in place and the mill is fully operational, Thompson expects to be employing up to 20 people, and shipping five to six truckloads a day, or 60,000 board feet.

It's a win-win situation for everyone involved, including Thompson.

"Balsam is plentiful in the high elevations, making up to 20 per cent of some of these stands, and logging companies are obliged to log them along with the wood they are there to log," he said.

"For (West Fraser's Pacific Inland Resources) to try to put this through their mills, it would fall apart and cause more problems than it is worth.

"That's because as (balsam wood) stands there dead, the wind blows the trees and they crack, and they get what they call 'checks,' but we can make a timber out of it, and it will stay together."

Thompson said balsam trees are usually burned or "pushed over the bank" and left unused. By finding a market for this wood, and buying it from PIR at a "fair price," he said, "we take it from them and help to lower their logging costs."

This is Thompson's third mill. He has lived in Moricetown since 1982 but has run mills in Burns Lake and Fort St. James. Some of the equipment in the new mill was salvaged from the Fort St. James mill, which burned



Seaton Forest Products co-owner Andy Thompson with squared balsam timber cants bound for China.

Catherine Matheson photo

down in 2013. He said this current opportunity evolved over the past few years.

"I started out selling this wood through brokers to Alberta, and the brokers suggested there was a market in China."

Seaton chips what's left over when the timbers are milled, and ships it to Burns Lake to be made into industrial pellets.

It's hard to say what the dollar value of the mill will be as it begins operations, said Thompson, but there is a definite value being added to the economy already, beginning with jobs.

"There's also loggers and millwrights and welders, and steel supply and industrial supplies," he said. "We are also open for local sales. People who need timbers for mining or even timber framers, should come out and take a look at some of our better quality timbers," he said.