

No time to waste: Freres begins post-wildfire timber salvage

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LYONS, OR - The suffocating smoke that blanketed the Santiam Canyon after Labor Day wildfires consumed nearly everything in their path is gone.

The Beachie Creek and Lionshead fires displaced more than 1,200 residents, destroyed more than 500 homes and consumed 400,000 acres of forest lands, both public and private.

The long process of rebuilding homes and lives has begun.

And for the Freres family, which has lived near Lyons since 1875 and operated wood products businesses there since 1922, that rebirth will take decades, not months or years. They operate Freres Lumber Co., Freres Timber and Evergreen BioPower — a co-gen plant that produces electricity serving 5,000 homes.

The work is already underway as loggers with chainsaws and heavy equipment operators are falling trees on Freres timberlands as quickly as possible, sorting them by size and fire damage and shipping them to the company's mills.

Rob Freres said the family-owned company plans to harvest as many board feet of wood in the next three months as it usually harvests in an entire year.

And the family plans to keep up that pace as long as there are viable trees left on the 7,500 acres of their 17,500 acres of tree farms that burned.

Their salvage program is starting on the Little North Fork of the Santiam River, where remains of the family's first mill still stand.

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Ziglinski Cutting's Dustin Macklin of Lacomb watches as a Douglas fir, damaged in the Beachie Creek Fire, crashes to the scorched earth. Thousands of acres of trees on Freres and BLM land in the distance were charred by the fire, which originated in the Opal Creek Wilderness Area within 10 miles of the Freres tree farm. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



Dustin Macklin of Lacomb talks about the hazards he faces felling trees that were killed by the Beachie Creek Fire. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



Rob Freres talks about the challenges his workers are up against as they attempt to salvage trees killed in the Beachie Creek Fire. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)

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“We also have eight Forest Service contracts on the Detroit Ranger District of the Willamette National Forest,” Freres said. “It looks like there will be four green (unburned) areas and four black (burned) areas. It looks like about 20.5 million board feet of 36 million board feet of timber is burned.”

Freres said the company gets about 10 million to 12 million board feet of wood per year from their own properties and uses 80 million to 100 million board feet in total annually in their mills.

“We hope to salvage 12 million board feet in the next two months,” Freres said. “We think we will have six to eight quarters to salvage good wood.”

And, Freres said, weather conditions will have extra importance this winter.

“Trees are already falling every day,” Freres said. “Roots are still burning.”

In addition to damaging trees, the roaring Beachie Creek Fire that came from the Opal Creek Wilderness Area and the Lionshead Fire that blew in from Central Oregon also destroyed more than 40 large plastic culverts.



Forester Aaron Hutchinson is a third-generation Freres Lumber employee and says dealing with the aftermath of the Beachie Creek Fire is complex and challenging. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



A few trees with their crowns still intact remain on Freres' Little North Fork tree farm. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



A Freres Lumber Co. road crew takes a break while installing a replacement culvert. So far the workers have replaced more than 40 plastic culverts destroyed by the Beachie Creek Fire. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)

“We had replaced metal culverts with plastic culverts to make fish passage easier,” Freres said.

All of those culverts will have to be replaced. The culverts cost \$15 per foot, not counting labor costs.

The company has 415 employees, but needs another 100, Freres said.

“We are marketing extensively, looking for good people,” Freres said. “We have increased our starting wage to \$15 per hour and are offering signing bonuses. But you must pass a drug test, and with marijuana being legal in Oregon, it’s difficult to find qualified people.”

The company includes a veneer mill, veneer drying facility, a small stud mill, a co-gen energy plant, a plywood lay-up plant in Mill City and a new mass plywood panel plant.

Freres lost a broad range of mixed-age trees, from 3-year-old reprod to mature 60-year-plus stands ready for harvesting.

The salvaging operation will not only require extra caution on the ground, but also at mill sites.

“Scalers are going to have to determine how deep the fire went,” Freres said. “Did it just burn the bark, or did it go deeper? If it’s just the bark and needles, we can debark it and move on. But paper mills are concerned about getting charred wood in chips, so we have to be careful.”

“We may have to run black and green wood on separate runs to segregate the chips,” Freres said.

Freres said it may come to the point that chainsaws will be needed at the mill to remove charred portions of logs.

“We can burn charred wood in our co-gen plant,” Freres said.

Freres said the company had to shut its operations down for two weeks during the fires because smoke was so thick.

“We actually handed out paychecks in the parking lot of the Safeway store in Stayton,” Freres said.

Aaron Hutchinson, who grew up in nearby Gates, is one of six company foresters. The Oregon State University graduate is a third-generation Freres employee, starting with his grandfather Adell, followed by his father, Dean.



Ziglinski Cutting's Dustin Macklin of Lacombe fells a Douglas fir tree that was destroyed when a firestorm swept over the Freres North Fork Tree Farm.

(MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



Dustin Macklin of Lacombe cuts down one of the Douglas firs being salvaged in a grove on Freres Lumber's North Fork Tree Farm.

(MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



Aaron Wainman of Callsen Cutting cuts into a Douglas fir with his harvester. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



Ferns are already sprouting back in the area adding color to the landscape. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



Soot flies as a harvester drops logs into a pile of Freres' North Fork tree farm. Once the logs get to the mill the company's log scalers will determine the extent of the damage. Some may just have bark damage while in others the fire may have worked its way into knots in the trees.

(MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



Freres Lumber Company is trying to race the clock to salvage millions of board feet of timber on the Freres tree farm before it goes to waste due to the Beachie Creek Fire. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)

His father and mother's home was destroyed in the fire.

A recent tour of charred trees on the North Fork offered a picture of a variety of operations — from replacing culverts to hand-falling trees to using heavy equipment to cut trees and create log decks as trucks made their way up and down roads.

Most of the trees are Douglas fir, but Hutchinson said hemlock trees “seem to be more brittle. They seem to break up easier.”

Hutchinson, who has worked for Freres for seven years, said the fire “burned hot and fast.”

“It burned all of the underbrush, but for many trees, it mostly scorched the bark and moved on,” Hutchinson said. “It didn't stay in one place long.”

Young trees — some just 3 years old — vanished from the landscape. Others offer a glimpse of how hot and fast the fire raged. Young tree limbs are frozen in a leaning fashion, having been shoved by the 60-mph winds that roared through the canyon.

“I'm worried about erosion that could bring whole trees down this winter,” Hutchinson said. “We may chip some of the worst trees and spread the chips on the ground for erosion control and to add nutrients to the soil.”

Hutchinson said the company usually plants 300,000 to 400,000 tree seedlings per year.

“We've ordered 700,000, then 2.2 million and 2.5 million for each of the next two years,” Hutchinson said.

Hutchinson said the company is using a drone with a camera system to review some burned-over areas.

State and federal officials are studying the causes of the fires. The Beachie Creek Fire had been burning in the Opal Creek Wilderness Area for several weeks before exploding due to the high winds.

The Lionshead Fire was shoved over the mountains from Central Oregon by the wind, and numerous spot fires were started when sparking power lines came down.

Contact Linn County reporter Alex Paul at 541-812-6114.



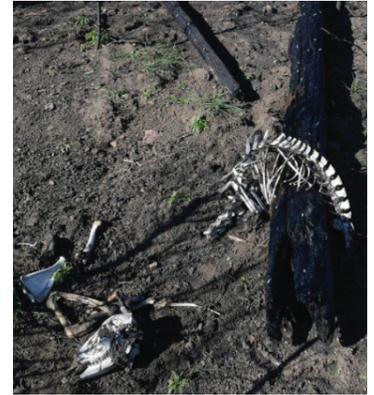
A crew uses a stroke-delimiter to prepare logs for transport of Freres land north of Mehama. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



A wildlife habitat tree remains as a charred snag in an area only two months ago was green with young seedlings growing from the Freres North Fork tree forest floor. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



Dustin Macklin of Lacombe checks the lean of a Douglas fir before driving in wedges to fell a damaged tree. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



A deer carcass that's bones appeared to be spread out by a scavenger is draped across a fire-burned log inside the burn area. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



A dump truck drives on Freres tree farm road near a stand of trees killed in the Beachie Creek fire. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)



A stand of trees on BLM land that borders the Freres North Fork tree farm. (MARK YLEN | MID-VALLEY MEDIA)