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# Freres Lumber's six mills survive Beachie Creek fire, will resume operations soon

**Jeff Manning**

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Amid the massive destruction wrought by Beachie Creek Fire up and down the Santiam River, the Freres Lumber Co., one of the area's largest employers, escaped largely intact.

The company's six mills in Lyons and Mill City, which employ about 415, all survived the fire undamaged. The mills will resume operations some of them perhaps as soon as late this week, said Rob Freres, president.

The Freres operation did take a big hit in the huge fire east of Salem.

"A great deal of our family timberland I think has been hammered," Freres said. He said he believes much of the company's road-building equipment has also probably been destroyed.

But the company's losses pale compared to the "loss of life and people's homes and businesses," he said.

The Beachie fire has burned 188,000 acres, 293 square miles. It remains 0% contained.

Freres has been a vocal critic of how the federal government has managed its forestland. Ending large-scale logging on federal land has also ended active management, which has only provided more dead trees and created more dense forests that result in more fuel for fires, he argues.

"The fires are hotter, larger, cataclysmic," he said. "It doesn't have to be that way, if not for all the environmentalists and their lawsuits."

Freres is a vocal advocate of increased logging. His remarks came in reaction to the news that George Atiyeh, the activist who led the fight to protect Opal Creek, is missing. Atiyeh's house on the Little North Santiam River was destroyed by the fire. His truck was in his driveway.



A truck driver hauls lumber amid wildfire smoke at Freres Lumber Co. in Lyons, Oregon on September 13, 2020. Amid the massive destruction wrought by Beachie Creek Fire up and down the Santiam River, the Freres Lumber Co., one of the area's largest employers, escaped largely intact.

(PHOTO: BROOKE HERBERT / THE OREGONIAN/OREGON LIVE)



Machinery is seen clouded in wildfire smoke at Freres Lumber Co. in Lyons, Oregon on September 13, 2020. Amid the massive destruction wrought by Beachie Creek Fire up and down the Santiam River, the Freres Lumber Co., one of the area's largest employers, escaped largely intact.

(PHOTO: BROOKE HERBERT / THE OREGONIAN/OREGON LIVE)

State agencies and climatologists have attributed last week's sudden eruptions of fires, which abruptly consumed more than 1 million acres across Oregon, to a combination of factors including climate change, forest management practices, and policies that seek to suppress every fire immediately – leaving more fuel for future burns.

Freres operates small-diameter and large diameter veneer plants, a veneer drying facility, a small stud mill, a plywood plant and a co-generation facility.

Freres is also a major player in the emerging “mass timber” business, an increasingly popular wood alternative to steel and concrete typically used in large office and residential buildings.

Freres makes its mass-timber panels out of plywood in one of its facilities in Lyons.

It also owns and manages more than 17,000 acres of timberland, most of it in the Santiam Canyon.

Until the fire, business was good for Freres. It was looking to add additional shifts at a couple of its mills and hire an additional 100 employees.

Finding people willing to fill those jobs has been difficult, Freres said, which he blames on the larger unemployment benefits package the federal government offered after the emergence of the global pandemic.

Both liberal and conservative economists who have studied that issue this summer have found repeatedly that the temporary, \$600 unemployment bonuses deterred few people from returning to work. In Oregon, 40% of the jobs lost to the pandemic have already bounced back.

However, employers continue to struggle to find people to fill some jobs despite Oregon’s high unemployment rate – 10.4% in July. In Oregon, that issue appears particularly acute in rural parts of the state and along the coast, places where there is a relatively small pool of potential workers to draw from.

Freres said the company’s plan at this point is to go ahead with the planned expansion despite the fire. He hopes some of his mills could reopen in just days. At this point, access remains a problem. Among other things, the thick smoke over the region has reduced visibility to the point that driving is hazardous, he said. “My cousin had a real tough time driving up there today because of the smoke,” Freres said.

The Beachie fire destroyed parts of Lyons, Mill City, Detroit and other small towns located along the Santiam River and Detroit Lake.

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**Night watchman Darrell Seiber, 75, keeps an eye on hotspots at Freres Lumber Co., on September 13, 2020, amid wildfire smoke in Lyons, Oregon. Amid the massive destruction wrought by Beachie Creek Fire up and down the Santiam River, the Freres Lumber Co., one of the area’s largest employers, escaped largely intact. (PHOTO: BROOKE HERBERT / THE OREGONIAN/OREGON LIVE)**



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**A tractor is parked at Freres Lumber Co. in Lyons, Oregon on September 13, 2020. Amid the massive destruction wrought by Beachie Creek Fire up and down the Santiam River, the Freres Lumber Co., one of the area’s largest employers, escaped largely intact.**

(PHOTO: BROOKE HERBERT  
THE OREGONIAN/OREGON LIVE)



**A stack of lumber sits amid wildfire smoke at Freres Lumber Co. in Lyons, Oregon on September 13, 2020. Amid the massive destruction wrought by Beachie Creek Fire up and down the Santiam River, the Freres Lumber Co., one of the area’s largest employers, escaped largely intact.**

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