

Post \$40M investment, Freres Engineered Wood's alternative product business grows

By: Pete Danko

Staff Reporter, Portland Business Journal

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Freres Engineered Wood — formerly known as Freres Lumber Co. — made its first mass plywood panel in 2017 after investing \$40 million into developing the engineered wood product, including building a 182,000-square-foot manufacturing facility.

Five years later, mass ply panels account for about 6% of the family-owned, Lyons-based company's revenue.



TYLER FRERES
PHOTO: COURTESY OF
FRERES ENGINEERED WOOD

"We're still very much a plywood producer and very much a veneer producer," sales VP Tyler Freres said.

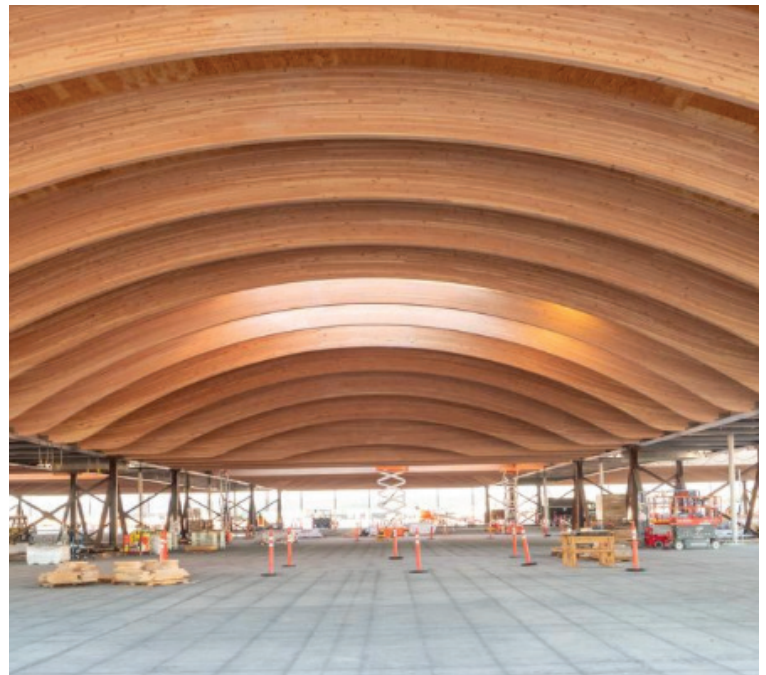
But that doesn't mean the 100-year-old company's optimism for mass timber has dimmed.

"Mass ply panels are a rapidly increasing portion of our business that's fairly stable now compared to where commodity prices are for typical materials," Tyler Freres said. "And while it's a niche product, we've doubled our sales at least from last year, and we anticipate doubling that next year as well."

Freres took the mass ply panel plunge when it saw cross-laminated timber begin to get attention in the U.S., and to protect itself from the ravages of the plywood market. It was squeezed by rising costs for logs and falling prices for its products thanks to cheap imports from Brazil, China and Russia.

"With MPP, we're not just making a commodity, we're actually making unique elements for a unique building in the world," Tyler Freres said. "It's very custom, very individual."

No better example is the 9-acre mass timber roof going up at Portland International Airport, for which Freres supplied mass ply panels. Three-quarters of the wood, Tyler Freres said, came from dead and dying trees from the September 2020 wildfires, and the rest was from local forests as well.



FRERES SUPPLIED MPP, USING MOSTLY WOOD SALVAGED FROM THE SEPTEMBER 2020 WILDFIRES, FOR THE ROOF AT THE NEW MAIN TERMINAL UNDER CONSTRUCTION AT PORTLAND INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. PHOTO: COURTESY OF FRERES ENGINEERED WOOD

"We're so appreciative of the Port of Portland that they led with sustainability and local resources," Freres said. "Timber has not been an uncontroversial area in Oregon for a long time and we're incredibly proud that we could deliver for them on a project of this magnitude."

Tyler Freres lamented that salvaging timber from Forest Service land scarred by the fires has been slow to unfold due to litigation. He sees that delay as of a piece with a contradictory approach to timber in Oregon.

"They would really like to encourage the growth of mass timber and use of mass timber in unique ways, especially for, say, prefabricated modular construction to help alleviate some homeless issues," he said. "But then on the flip side, they seem to forget the fact that you actually need timber in order to make mass timber products."