

Freres Lumber got a \$5 million PPP loan; now it can't find enough employees

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At a time when many companies are struggling to keep employees on the payroll, one of the state's largest wood products manufacturers can't find enough employees to operate at full capacity.

While Oregon's unemployment rate is at near-record levels, Freres Lumber of Lyons is seeking to hire 100 workers to get back to full capacity after a number of workers resigned over the past months.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in March, Freres Lumber had about 475 employees; now it is below 400.

"We're down one shift in our veneer plant and one shift in our plywood plant," Freres Lumber President Rob Freres said. "People aren't showing up, probably out of some anxiety due to the COVID thing. We've been really, really short-handed. We're running 60%."

Freres Lumber was approved for a \$5 million PPP loan on April 27, and Freres said the company will spend all of that on payroll.

Despite an unemployment rate in Oregon of 11.2% in June, the company has been searching for employees since the slowdown.

The nearly 100-year-old wood products producer was forced to shut down for the first week in May as orders slowed along with the state's shut down, and it ran out of room to store the plywood and other products it produces.

But it kept its employees on the payroll.

During that week the company was closed, three workers contracted COVID-19.



Freres Lumber spent about \$10,000 to install dividers to keep workers safe from spreading COVID-19. (PHOTO: SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL)



Many of the workers at Freres Lumbers' Mass Plywood Plant have been able to social distance due to technology such as robots and cranes.

(PHOTO: SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL)

While some manufacturing businesses have struggled with outbreaks of employees contracting COVID-19, Freres said the three employees who contracted the coronavirus quarantined with pay.

“They caught that when they weren’t here,” Freres said. “They wouldn’t have caught it if we wouldn’t have had to shut down for a week.”

Freres Lumber has provided PPE and cleaning supplies, mandated social distancing by marking separation, discouraged use of lunchrooms, installed plexiglass barriers, closed offices to the public and increased third-party cleaning of public areas.

Freres Lumber vice president of Operations Kyle Freres said the company has paid for employees to stay home while not feeling well, encouraged them to maintain social distance while away from work and been upfront about their cases and informed co-workers of possible exposures.

“No one wants to get sick and no one wants to transmit sickness to others,” Kyle Freres said. “We all realize that COVID transmissions in the workplace can affect the health of friends, family, and co-workers.

“We are an essential industry that worked through the pandemic, and we wanted to be as safe as possible while sustaining the livelihood of our employees and our business.”

Though Freres Lumber is located at its multiple facilities in Lyons, it draws most of its employees from the Highway 22 corridor cities of Salem, Keizer, Turner, Aumsville, Stayton, Mill City and Detroit, many of which have been harder hit than the Linn County city of 1,200.

Despite employees coming from areas hard hit by the coronavirus, it still has only had three employees contract the virus.

Rob Freres said the company is hiring for skilled positions including structural engineers, CNC operators, electricians and truck drivers as well as unskilled workers.

“We’ll help with schooling and it doesn’t have to be directly work-related at the present time,” Rob Freres said.

To apply, go to <https://frereslumber.com/careers/current-job-openings/>. Positions pay from \$13.85 to \$25 an hour.

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