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Younger generations not interested in timber

By Rachel MinskePress-Gazette Media 8:49 p.m. CDT July 6, 2014



Harvester operator Grant Zelazoski works on a private selective harvest timber sale in Oneida County, Wis. Much like farming, the logging industry is often multi-generational and family-ran but younger generations are not interested in continuing the tradition. (Photo: Wm.Glasheen/Post-Crescent Media)Buy Photo

Story Highlights

- Much like farming, the logging industry is often multi-generational and family-ran.
- No one under the age of 18 can legally operate power-driven equipment in sawmills.
- Low wages and long hours are keeping younger generations out of the forests.

Scott Sawle was raised in the sawmill business.



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He remembers working on his family's mill in southwestern Wisconsin when he was 10. That was in 1958, when child labor laws were more lax than they are today.

Now 66, Sawle is a second-generation sawmill owner, and he is convinced his Richland Center mill won't support a third.

"I've got two daughters who have no interest in getting involved," he said.

Accounting for 692 jobs statewide, logging is a viable industry in Wisconsin, but many are concerned about its future.

Many young people are not interested in pursuing a career in the field. Long hours, mediocre pay and a more informed general public are keeping younger generations out of the forests, Sawle said.

Much like farming, the logging industry is often multi-generational and family-ran, said Matt Jensen, the vice president of the Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association in Rhinelander.

"You're either married into it or born into it," Jensen said. "The only way you can learn the business is to be able to work at a younger age."

Jensen is a third-generation logger and owns Whitetail Logging in Crandon alongside his father, Pete.

"This is a business that is really hard to learn and it's really a lifestyle. If you don't teach your children the work ethic, they're not going to continue," said Jensen, who has a couple of siblings interested in continuing the family business.

Cultivating interest

One of the biggest challenges facing the forestry industry is the negative perception about wood usage, said Scott Bowe, a forestry and wildlife ecology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"It's hypocritical because people use wood every day," he said. "We need fresh, young people to carry the business forward. We consume more wood every year. The wood's got to come from somewhere."

An increasing number of college students are pursuing a degree in forestry, but Bowe said most of his students want to work as forest managers and never consider the industry side of the field.

"You see the average age of loggers increase every year," Bowe said. "There aren't new people or younger people getting into the field."

The average Wisconsin logger is 35 to 44 years old, according to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. In 2012, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projected a 4.7 percent drop in the logging industry's employment numbers by 2022.



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According to the Wisconsin Department of Workplace Development, anyone under 18 is prohibited from operating power-driven equipment in sawmills.

"Even if their son or daughter wanted to learn and carry on the family business, they can't until they're 18," said Ben Parsons, the training coordinator for Forest Industry Safety and Training Alliance Inc. in Rhinelander.

A new generation?

By the time a new generation is old enough to take on the family business, it's often too late, Parsons said.

"This is the generation that's exposed to massive amounts of information on the Internet," he said. "This generation has to have a reason why they're going into this, not because 'my Dad wants to do it.'"

Fully mechanized logging equipment is becoming the standard across the industry, Parsons said. Although still risky at times, mechanization generally allows for a safer workplace environment but also requires highly skilled operators — those people who often find they can make more money in other industries, Parsons said.

"Loggers are working 70 hours a week on average," Parsons said. "Twelve hours a day, seven days a week."

The average wage last year for all forestry and logging industry workers in Wisconsin was \$32,795 according to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. For many young people, the payoff isn't worth the work put in, Parsons said.

"The younger generation is not looking at logging as a viable profession," he said.

Congress is beginning to realize the importance of cultivating interest among new generations and members are working on ways to combat the industry's challenges.

Legislation that would relax some child labor laws in the logging industry was introduced in May. If passed, the Future Logging Careers Act would allow 16- and 17-year-olds to work in a logging or mechanized operation owned by a parent. So far there is no set date when the bill will be discussed in Congress.

Parsons agreed that allowing younger people to help out with the family business would be a good thing.

"Personally I'm a firm believer in kids learning the value of hard work at a young age as long as it's not a forced situation," Parsons said. "But we can't do that in logging. We can't take that 16-year-old daughter of a third generation logger and teach her how to use a quarter of a million dollar machine."



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Sawmill owner Scott Sawle said he would love if a family member continued the business, but he is not holding out hope. He plans to sell his business within the next few years.

"I'm very passionate about our industry," Sawle said. "We have such a hard time finding people who want to work."

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