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THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

ID: Skilled-Labor Sawmill Jobs Going Unfilled; Industry Teams up with Colleges to Train Workers

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Idaho's sawmills once relied on the brute strength of their workers to turn logs into lumber.

Now, they need more employees like Jeremy Lozano-Keays.

The 30-year-old electrical technician is part of a team overseeing the sophisticated electronic equipment that keeps Idaho Forest Group's Chilco sawmill operating.

Each hour it's running, the mill north of Coeur d'Alene spits out enough lumber to frame six to eight houses. Eight electrical technicians work at the mill, including Lozano-Keays.

The skilled-labor jobs pay between \$25 and \$34 per hour, plus benefits. Yet Idaho Forest Group has difficulty recruiting qualified candidates for the positions, said Tommy Groff, the mill's maintenance manager.

Faced with labor shortages, the company has teamed up with North Idaho College, Lewis Clark State College and other wood products manufacturers to train 200 sawmill workers over the next two years.

"When people think of sawmills, they think of the sawmills of yesterday, when a lot of sweat and blood was required to make each board," Groff said. However, "very few of our 230 employees ever touch a board."

As mills have become more automated, they employ fewer workers, but those workers are highly trained, said Beti Becker, a consultant for Idaho Forest Group.

North Idaho's sawmill employment peaked in the mid-1990s at about 3,600 workers. Last year, the wood products industry employed about 1,900 workers in the state's five northern counties.

Becker, who spent four decades as a human resources manager in the forest products industry, recalls when young men from rural areas followed their dads and uncles into jobs at local sawmills. But after 20 years of industry downturns and downsizing, that type of family succession is much rarer, she said.

During the 1990s and 2000s, "a lot of people re-trained and took other jobs," Becker said. The industry is still recovering from that exodus, she said.

These days, sawmills are looking for operators with advanced manufacturing experience, said Groff, the maintenance manager. And the industry is competing with a lot of other employers for workers with that skill set, he said.

To fill the gap, sawmill workers will get training through the colleges to help them advance in fields such as boiler operation, industrial mechanics and programmable logic controls, the digitized computers that run the mills' machinery.

The Idaho Department of Labor is putting up \$483,000 in grant money for the training. Another \$142,000 will come from cash and in-kind donations from mill operators. Besides Idaho Forest Group, the other contributors are Potlatch Corp., Stimson Lumber Co., Plummer Forest Products and Empire Lumber Co.

"It's making a difference," said Scott Sheppard, Stimson Lumber's director of manufacturing.



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Over the past couple of years, Stimson used similar workforce grants to train journeymen electricians in programmable logic controls.

Three months of training helped Lozano-Keays, the Idaho Forest Group electrical technician, increase his knowledge and move up the pay scale at the Chilco mill. He'd gotten his start in manufacturing at a California steel mill, where he also worked with electronics, and he's close to finishing a degree in organizational management.

"My first impression of this mill was that it was a lot more high-tech than I expected," said Lozano-Keays, who moved to North Idaho with his wife as part of a lifestyle change.

The sawmill on U.S. Highway 95 has been part of the local landscape for decades. But the machinery inside the green metal buildings has gone through decades of upgrades.

As each log enters the Chilco mill, it's scanned electronically, which determines how the log will be cut based on customers' orders and daily lumber prices.

Fragrant fir and larch logs are turned into dimension lumber, which is sold to big-box stores such as Lowe's and Home Depot and retail outlets that cater to contractors.

Since the software that runs the equipment gets updated regularly, there's always something new to learn, Lozano-Keays said.

The digitized equipment is "the brains of the sawmill," but even it needs regular monitoring and maintenance, Groff said.

"It's hard to find good technicians," he said.

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