

Locals win National Fire Plan award

By GREG LEMON Staff Reporter

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced its annual National Fire Plan Award winners this week, with a group of local businesses and agencies garnering recognition.

The group - known as the Roundwood Engineered Structures Dreamteam - was recognized for its participation and innovation in designing and building several local structures out of small-diameter logs.

The group includes the Bitterroot National Forest, Porterbilt Company south of Hamilton, Bitterroot Resource Conservation and Development Area, Friends of the Darby Library and Beaudette Consulting Engineers in Missoula.

The National Fire Plan Award is given to people or groups who have worked to reduce wildfire threats around communities, according to the press release.

"These awards showcase the tremendous dedication across the nation of those who work daily to reduce the threats of wildland fire," said David Tenny, Agriculture Deputy Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment, in the release.

Local innovation of ways to utilize the material coming off of the National Forest has been progressive, said Nan Christianson, from the Bitterroot National Forest.

"I think we excelled at some of the opportunities that we were given to help the forested lands recover by finding ways to use that material," she said.

Small-diameter wood was in structures, like the new Darby Library, the bridge that will be built at Traveler's Rest State Park in Lolo, and the town pavilion that is being erected in Townsend. These were all built and designed by Porterbilt Company and Beaudette Consulting Engineers and much of the funding for them came from Forest Service grants.

"The idea was to show that we could utilize some of this material," said Bruce Haroldson, with Beaudette Engineers.

Most of the material used was insect-killed lodgepole pine from Idaho. It has no value for lumber, but it's perfect for the small diameter log structures, said Ron Porter, owner of Porterbilt Company.

Porter and Haroldson worked with the Forest Product Laboratory out of Madison, Wis., who developed a technique to more accurately test the strength of the smaller trees.

The tests demonstrated that the smaller trees were able to be used in support systems, said Haroldson.

This innovation in testing and design has created a value-added product out of material that once was considered non-commercial, said Porter.

Now the challenge will be to push forward and work to make the technology and products compete in the open market place, without the federal grants, he said.

"I think the demand's going to be there," said Porter. "Nothing like this takes off real quick. You've got to show something to people who are willing to take a look at it then do it."

Craig Rawlings, small wood enterprising agent with the Missoula Community Development Corporation, agrees.

Rawling's corporation was also recognized in the award and as he continues to look into the future, he sees more and more opportunity for finding value-added products in material that was once burned in slash piles.

Rawlings continues to work with businesses in Western Montana to develop more methods of using non-commercial material generated from thinning the national forests.

"I think our work developing these value-added products over time is going to create better markets for this wood," he said.

But much of that innovation started in the Bitterroot. Now when Rawlings talks to businesses about expanding into the value-added timber markets he takes them up the Bitterroot Valley.

"It seems like every time I turn around there's somebody traveling here from someplace in the west," he said.

He takes them to Traveler's Rest State Park, then to Victor schools to see the biomass boiler system, then to Porterbilt Company and finally to Darby to see the new library and their school's biomass boiler.

"It doesn't take long for them to figure out what they ought to be doing when they get home," he said.

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