

First Nations Forestry Program

Building Strength



North Thompson Indian Band

April 2001

The North Thompson Indian Band is 'sharp' when it comes to sawmilling

The Simpcw people for which the North Thompson Indian Band's (NTIB) forestry company is named are part of the Secwepemc or Shuswap people. They speak the Secwepemc language and have occupied the North Thompson River drainage and upper Fraser River areas for generations. Most of the 500 Simpcw people live on the North Thompson Indian Reserve of Chu Chua, just north of Barriere, BC.

A number of band members work in forestry and are involved in activities such as sawmilling, logging, silviculture and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) work. The NTIB created SIMPCW Development Co. in 1991 as the corporate body to manage logging and sawmilling operations. In recent years, the band's logging activities stopped in favor of individual band members developing their own contracting companies. The NTIB used to be involved in silviculture contracting, but this has also been passed over to individual band contractors. Now the band assists logging and silviculture contractors to secure work with local forest companies and the BC Ministry of Forests. Currently, the SIMPCW sawmill employs 23 people on a two-shift operation.

A major boost for the NTIB towards developing their own forestry operations came in January 1999 when SIMPCW acquired a major forest licence. This licence allows harvesting 53,000 cubic meters of timber per year for ten years. One of the imposed conditions to operate this tenure was that the band must meet the requirements of the BC Forest Practices Code. In addition, the NTIB must employ a minimum of 17 people in their mill and utilize an equivalent volume



Steve Jules hard at work on a saw grinder.



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Chief Nathan Matthew, North Thompson Indian Band, in front of SIMPCW sawmill.

various types of forestry contracts for the BC Ministry of Forests and for forest companies.

Chief of the NTIB, Nathan Matthew, explains that, "They have a good GIS system, and they are trying to be contemporary when working with technology." As a result, their GIS department has secured both direct work and contracts for companies to do GIS-related projects.

Currently, the band mill produces between 30,000 and 34,000 board feet of lumber per day, providing 22 community jobs. When the band started sawmilling, they could only afford very old equipment. Having to operate a mill with old equipment

was expensive in terms of repairing and replacing parts. Therefore, for the company to remain in operation over the long term, the objective was to gradually upgrade the mill so that equipment repairs were not such a huge factor in mill downtime and high operating costs.

A major initiative for SIMPCW over the last two years has been to replace their circular saw with two new band saws. Switching to this type of saw offered higher log utilization which makes the mill more cost competitive in the marketplace. SIMPCW also developed its own saw filing facility on site to reduce sharpening costs. This proved to be not only more cost effective, but it has also created three new jobs for band members on the reserve.

of logs in their sawmill, excluding any hemlock pulp grade logs. Given these harvest levels, the band anticipated that their sawmill would manufacture 40,000 cubic meters, or 10 to 12 million board feet of lumber per year.

Not only is the NTIB involved in logging and milling, but they also have a Natural Resources Department that secures contracts and operates silviculture, watershed management, and fisheries projects. They also own a GIS and a Global Positioning System for which contracting services are offered. Their Natural Resource Department has a diversely skilled staff, and this strength has allowed SIMPCW to compete for





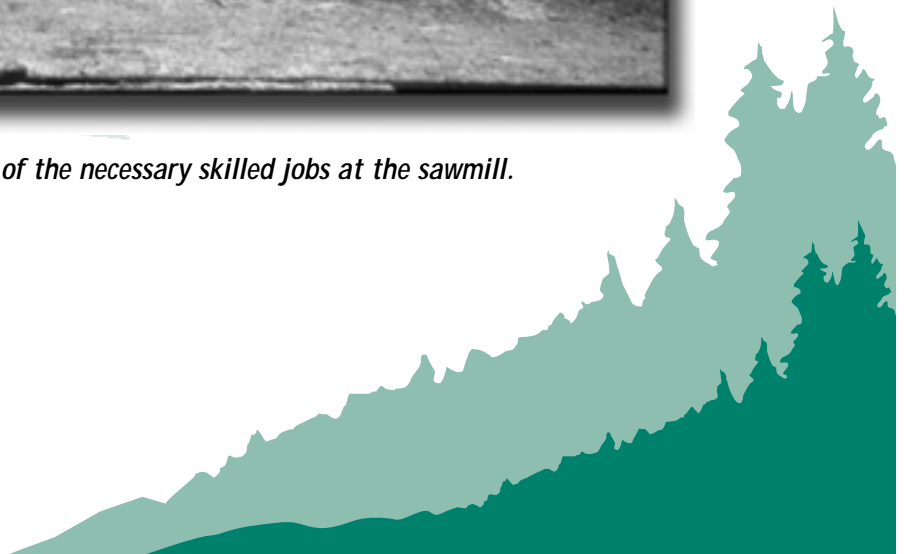
“Since log prices have been very high, SIMPCW has had to develop higher utilization for all logs brought through the mill. Otherwise they simply could not make money,” explains Chief Matthew. Milling using band saws is different from using circular saws, so with that conversion came a different kind of custom saw filing. This switch of saw types posed a challenge for the mill’s operation because when SIMPCW had a circular saw they had both the equipment and staff who could sharpen and maintain the blades. However, when the mill switched to band saws they didn’t have the proper sharpening equipment or trained personnel. Consequently, the dull band blades had to be transported many kilometers away for custom

sharpening which was a significant cost to the operation. For example, one band saw was producing up to six dull blades a day and these had to be shipped by truck to the nearest saw filing facility – more than 200 kilometers away in Lac la Hache.

With funding support from the First Nations Forestry Program (FNFP), SIMPCW was able to purchase essential older, but still functional saw filing equipment. They also arranged for professional training in saw filing for three young band members, two of whom are enrolled in a saw filing apprenticeship program.



Lumber sorting is one of the necessary skilled jobs at the sawmill.





As Chief Matthew explains, in order to keep a mill operation viable, “it is a matter of putting the things in place that need to be in place,” with respect to having proper mill equipment and trained workers.

The saw filing training program was supported with a financial training and equipment purchase contribution from the FNFP, plus training support from the Shuswap Training and Education Program (STEP). Prior to and after the saw filing course was completed, Gilbert Smith Forest Products Ltd. and Tolko Industries Ltd. accommodated the trainees for a two-week job shadowing program in their saw filing operations. At the mill, funds from the FNFP allowed SIMPCW to hire a trainer to provide on-the-job operational saw filing, plus benching training for the two band members. The FNFP also assisted with some of the band saw sharpening equipment purchases and upgrades.

Over both the short and long term, the company will see many benefits from this addition. The new saw filing operation is providing immediate employment for two band members, with plans to maintain three jobs over time. Once the trainees receive their certification in saw filing through the apprenticeship program, they will be able to train others. By having saw sharpening skills, these band members will be qualified to provide custom saw filing services for other sawmills. Not only does this project benefit mill employees and band members, but it also extends to the logistics of running the sawmill. It will reduce transportation costs, reduce the risk of damage to blades during transportation, reduce the amount of blade handling, and allow the company to maintain a lower inventory of saw blades. Overall, it will mean a reduction in mill operating costs.

When Chief Matthew was asked if he would do anything differently if he were to do this again, he answered, “We would have gone into band saw technology sooner and would have accessed training earlier and more consistently.”

This project was a necessary step for the NTIB to continue developing their sawmill into a viable business while creating jobs in the community. Future goals include securing long-term sources of fiber for the mill and to eventually enter into secondary manufacturing activities.

Contact Information

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