MINNESOTA FORESTRY NOTES

No. 182
July 15, 1967

IDLE SAWMILLS IN NORTH CENTRAL MINNESOTA

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Statistics for sawmills vary considerably, with mills going out of and coming into production each year according to the demand for lumber. In 1947 there were 53,109 sawmills in operation in the U.S., 43,615 in 1952 and 50,416 in 1953.[2] The owners of the mills which are idle one year and producing the next are referred to, by the industry, as "marginal operators" whose production is considered important when the market is expanding and lumber is needed.[3]

This limited study was made to determine whether the sawmills listed as idle can be counted on to expand production when needed. Included as a part of a current study by the School of Forestry, Restraints to Aspen Lumber Supplies from Minnesota Sawmills, is a survey of the idle mills of a 12 county area of North Central Minnesota. Counties surveyed include Aitkin, Beltrami, Cass, Crow Wing, Hubbard, Itasca, Kanabec, Koochiching, Lake of the Woods, Mille Lacs, Morrison and Wadena. This locality was chosen because it has 46.6% of the sawmills, contains about 45% of the commercial forest land area of the state, has over 50% of the available aspen sawtimber and accounts for over 50% of the sawtimber cut. This part of the study was conducted to determine the characteristics of the idle mills of this area and to ascertain their production potential for future supply of aspen lumber. Seventy-nine questionnaires were mailed to the idle mills. Fifty of these (63%) were returned completed and two were returned because the addressees could not be located by the post offices.

Results of the survey indicate that the typical idle mill has a maximum capacity of about one million board feet of lumber per year, has been idle for 8 years, is in need of repairs and the owners are otherwise employed and probably will not return to the sawmilling business. A detailed analysis of the data showed forty-three mills still idle, five had been sold, one had been torn down and one was operating. One mill had not been operating since 1940 but 23 (about 62%) of those reporting had become idle in 1960 or later (Table I). Three mills indicated they intended to operate again within the next six months; but eight of the respondents (16%), including these three, said they would operate again if sufficient markets were available and price high enough to provide a profit. Thirty-one reported they definitely would not operate again; three did not know whether they would again operate.

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2/ Hair, Dwight and Ulrich, Alice H., U. S. Forest Service, The Demand and Price Situation for Forest Products 1966, U. S. D. A. Miscellaneous Publication No. 1045, Washington, D. C., January 1967.

3/ National Lumber Manufacturers Association, Lumber in Pace with the Space Age, Washington, D. C., 1959.

Published by the School of Forestry, University of Minnesota, St. Paul 1, Minnesota, cooperating with the Division of Forestry, Minnesota Conservation Department, and Forest Industries of Minnesota

The questionnaire had five set questions and one open answer question intended to arrive at reasons for not operating. Response to the set questions were as follows: no one reported an inability to obtain sawlogs, two reported no market for their lumber, five checked that they were unable to obtain manpower to operate, fifteen indicated their mills needed repair and seventeen had other employment with a better income. To the open answer question, thirty-five respondents had one or more "other" reasons for not operating. A number of these answers could be classified into two groups: fourteen were either retired, disabled, ill or deceased; fifteen had either sold their mill, were offering it for sale or had only purchased it for their own limited use. Additional "other" reasons were: price of help too high, lumber prices unstable, insurance too high, and equipment parts too costly but none of these reasons were mentioned more than once.

Conclusions

1. Idle mills are generally small capacity and are sidelines for owners with spare time or those having small amounts of timber of their own available.
2. Once a mill becomes idle, it is quite likely that it will remain idle.
3. Little future production can be expected from the idle sawmills of this twelve county area.
4. If the idle mills of this area are typical of all idle mills in the state (they constitute 43.8% of all idle mills listed) then Minnesota's idle mills do not fit the national picture of an expandable production potential when lumber is needed on the market.

TABLE I

Number of Idle Sawmills & Intention of Future Operation in North Central Minnesota

Year Mill Idled	No. of Mills Idled that Year	Owner Plans to Operate Mill Again in 6 Months		Owner Would Operate if Demand and Profit Potential Increased		
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Don't Know
1940	1	0	1	0	1	0
1950	2	0	2	0	2	0
1954	3	1	2	1	2	0
1955	1	0	1	0	1	0
1957	1	0	1	0	1	0
1958	4	0	4	1	3	0
1959	2	0	2	0	2	0
1960	5	0	5	1	4	0
1961	2	1	1	1	1	0
1962	5	0	5	0	5	0
1963	3	0	2*	1	1*	0
1964	2	0	2	1	1	0
1965	6	0	6	0	3	3
No Date Given	6	1	5	1	5	0
Total	43	3	39	8	31	3

* One mill owner gave date, but did not complete balance of questionnaire.

Published as Sci. Jour. Ser. Paper No. 6309 of the Univ. of Minn. Agr. Expt. Sta.