

# THE STAR-HERALD

## RC&D takes annual tour

By Kathy McCarty

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Staff Photo/Kathy McCarty

MATT BELL, owner of Northeast Pellets LLC in Ashland, served as tour guide at the mill for participants of the St. John Aroostook RC&D annual summer tour in August. Pictured from left are: Bell, speaking to Mike Eisensmith, NMDC's economic development director. In back watching a machine produce wood pellets is Ben Lynch, director, Central Aroostook Soil and Water Conservation District. Bell's mill, offline for about two years following a 2009 fire, is back online and producing tons of pellets each week.

Participants of the St. John Aroostook RC&D's annual summer tour traveled throughout Aroostook County in August, visiting various sites beginning with Northeast Pellets LLC in Ashland and concluding with a stop at the bypass project in Caribou.

While in Ashland, they got to tour the now-operational pellet mill, with owner Matt Bell serving as tour guide. Bell explained the purpose of each building, beginning with the raw materials storage facility, then on to the hammer mill, production site and ending with the bagging of freshly-made pellets.

What impressed the group most was the fact Bell's facility works with other local businesses, starting at the raw material stage — he starts with waste wood material from other mills — and continuing all the way to the sale of his pellets at area stores, including S.W. Collins, with locations in Caribou, Presque Isle and Houlton, as

well as Lyford's Stove Shop in Presque Isle and Ashland Hardware, among others.

"It's a closed loop right in the County," said Alain Ouellette, NMDC's planning and development division director, who noted even the bags are locally made. "He gets his bags from Bob Umphrey (Northeast Packaging)."

Tony Levesque, RC&D treasurer, asked Bell where his product was marketed.

"Mostly in the County but we also sell to the Bangor area and points south of there," responded Bell.

Mike Eisensmith, NMDC's economic development director, asked about bulk sales.

"Buck Farms and the Doyens currently are purchasing in bulk to heat their facilities," Bell said.

Dennis Berube, director of planning and transportation at NMDC, talked with Bell about the types of wood best suited for making pellets.



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WATCHING A TRUCKLOAD OF CHIPS being dumped at Irving Woodlands LLC's Pinkham Mill in Ashland are, from left: Denis Berube, director of planning and transportation at NMDC; Rick Fowler, site manager; UMPI Professor Chunzeng Wang; Tony Levesque, St. John Aroostook RC&D treasurer; RC&D Board member Ed Hews; and

“Soft wood is actually better, since it contains more moisture,” noted Bell, indicating it’s the resin that holds the pellets together. “These are all-natural pellets — nothing’s added to hold them together.”

Ouellette said he’d heard there was an interest in smaller bags and asked Bell if he was considering processing pellets to market in smaller packages.

“We’re considering packaging in smaller bags — mostly for the elderly — to make it easier to handle when filling a stove,” said Bell.

Ouellette reiterated the fact that Bell is using bags from Northeast Packaging in Presque Isle and therefore “keeping it (business) in the County.”

“We also have customers expressing interest in what we refer to as ‘private label’ — pellets are being packaged for Lyford’s Stove Shop with their name on the bag,” said Bell.

The next stop for the group was the Irving Woodlands LLC’s Pinkham Mill in Ashland, which included a presentation on the new wood chipping operation; as well as the process of stockpiling, loading and shipping by rail. The tour was led by Rick Fowler, manager of the site.

Fowler discussed various aspects of the company, including the fact that Irving manages over one million acres of forestland in Maine and is a leader in land management.

“About 1.1 million tons are cut each year, with 350,000 to 400,000 tons going to our own mills and the rest to companies throughout the United States,” said Fowler.

According to Fowler, Irving actively restores cut areas, planting about one million trees this year alone. “We’re committed long-term in Maine,” he said.

Of particular importance to the company is rail service. J.D. Irving was the bid winner earlier this summer, taking over the line formerly operated by Montreal, Maine & Atlantic between Millinocket and Madawaska.

“We’re particularly interested in rail,” said Fowler, thanking those present who had a hand in helping the company through the bid process and subsequent acquisition. “Rail is very important to us. We have a long way to move products to reach our end customers. Finding enough trucks can be a challenge. Rail’s a really good option.”

Fowler said the company is working to address issues that have affected rail service in the past.

“Speed and getting enough traffic to be viable is a challenge,” he said, noting that rail has been instrumental in serving the company’s St. Leonard, New Brunswick, facility. “They typically only have three days’ inventory.” “They don’t run out of work in St. Leonard — the crown jewel,” said Berube.

Fowler said the business has been ramping up, “trying to get more cars loaded.”

“It’s all good. It brings us to what we need to do,” Fowler continued.

The Pinkham site specializes in creating wood chips, which are then shipped to other locations for various purposes. Fowler said size (of the wood chips) is critical to customers, since varying sizes are used for different purposes.

Fowler explained that some chipping is done in the woods, with truckloads brought to the mill for final processing.

“We’re working hard to get a new machine in the woods,” he said.

He said the company is dedicated to educating staff, with classes taught regularly.

“It’s important to me to get them (employees) in there and trained,” Fowler said.

“I grew up near the woods. It’s amazing how it’s (wood processing) changed. Workers are now trained in a simulator,” said Ouellette.

Fowler said times have changed and so has the education process.

“A lot of people don’t have that experience now (learning as they grow up). Young people need to be trained,” said Fowler.

Fowler then took tour participants to watch the dumping of a truckload of wood chips.

“Chip size determines whether they go to paper production, etc. The chipper runs five days a week, producing over 30,000 tons a week,” said Fowler.

The group also got to see chips being loaded into a freight car for shipment by rail.

Once the tour was completed, participants continued on their day’s journey, traveling up Route 11, with stops in Fort Kent at the annual Muskie Fishing Derby and for lunch, then on to Frenchville to check out the public boat landing, before finishing their tour visiting the bypass project in Caribou.