

'Clear Cutting' Can Speak for Itself

Oct. 5, 1975

Despite Criticism, Weyerhaeuser Practice Paying Off

By Ferdie J. Deering

A weak link in Oklahoma's industrial development is the fact that most commodities produced here are shipped elsewhere for processing and manufacturing. Oklahomans receive only raw materials prices for wheat, cotton, peanuts, livestock and hides, while other states or countries get jobs and profits.

This is changing significantly in the timber country of southeastern Oklahoma. An example of how manufacturing our raw materials into marketable products before exporting provides more jobs for Oklahomans occurred a few weeks ago.

Weyerhaeuser Company, one of the nation's largest lumber firms, moved into the state about five years ago, acquiring the large holdings of Dierks Lumber Co. and other properties. A chipping plant was put into operation at Wright City, supplying materials for a fiber board factory at Craig and a paper mill at Valliant.

Trees Vital

In August this year, an 18-day shutdown had been scheduled because of a slowdown in orders from New Orleans and

other outlets. Unexpectedly, a large order came through from the Egyptian government that kept the plants running and scores of employees working.

The paper mill has one machine 608 feet long which turns out paper for making boxes in rolls 269 inches wide. Another machine makes paper for corrugated material, and boxes are made elsewhere.

These mills require large quantities of trees, so future supplies are vital. Strangely, the timber company is being harshly criticized by environmentalists and sportsmen for its tree planting program. Specifically, they don't like an operation called "clear cutting", wherein trees are harvested, the land cleared and replanted to pine seedlings, much like a row crop.

Weyerhaeuser planted 36 million seedling pines this year, with 93 per cent survival, and is scheduling large plantings in the future. They reach harvest size in about 25 years.

Sportsmen Critical

Just as a plowed field looks pretty rough before clods are broken and the crop planted, a clear cut tract may be considered ugly before

seedlings are up to a showing. Grass and other cover comes back in six months to a year.

Sportsmen have criticized clear cutting on grounds that forests should be left in their natural state, an impossibility because most timber in Oklahoma has been cut over at least once. The bigger, better pine trees were taken out, leaving scrub timber and hardwood trees to grow into overcrowded thickets that fall far short of the natural state of forests a century ago.

Wayne Plummer of Weyerhaeuser took me on a tour of their lands. We saw this year's plantings as tall as 18 inches, others two years old, three, four and five years old, and an experimental clear cut planting made by Dierks 19 years ago.

This latter planting obviously was too thickly set, but the pines had larger diameters than pines that had grown back naturally in adjacent tracts after being cut over, perhaps 50 years ago.

Proof Shown

Later, in another old regrowth forest, using a dull pocket knife, Plummer cut off a pine about six feet tall and $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch in diameter. It had 10 annual

rings. Trees in the five-year-old planted tract down the road were two to three times as tall and ranged from four to eight inches in diameter.

Mostly, clear cutting is being used on fairly level cut over forest farm land. The Weyerhaeuser rotation is on a 25 year plan, which means that when they get it into full swing, no more than 4 per cent of the acreage would be clear cut and replanted in a single year.

The next day, Jerry Miller, Finley rancher, drove deep into the hills of Pushmataha County to show me cut-over tracts that have never been replanted

and the site of a saw-mill his father operated prior to 1927. We drove down the trail where there used to be a lumber railroad eight miles long and saw a timber slide where logs were shoved down the mountainside.

Miller's father, William D. "Button" Miller, came from Texas in the 1890s to lease acreage for timber harvest from the Choctaw Nation. He remained active until his death in 1973, just 19 days short of being 100 years old.

During his lifetime, Button Miller harvested timber from some 150,000 acres and sawed it into lumber for retail yards. He operated like others of his

time. Land owners wanted the trees off so they could farm, and there were no tree planting programs.

Natural reseedling has restored great numbers of trees, but the regrowth forests are not as productive as either the natural forests they succeeded or the planted forests.

Because of the rough terrain, planted forests always will be interspersed with uncontrolled tree growth on adjacent tracts, and wild life will have cover and food. Wild life seems to be in greater danger of being crowded out by non-residents building week-end or vacation homes in the scenic area.