

Small Business Spotlight:

Andy Thompson | Manager and Co-owner

Seaton Forest Products LTD., Est. 2016

Life Story

Andy was first exposed to sawmills while working on a ranch in 1973 after moving to B.C. from Ontario. He officially started his career in sawmills 15 years ago when he saw one for sale and has been building them ever since.

What motivated you to start your own business?

For my first two sawmills, I saw a need and an opportunity to make use of the dry pine beetle-infested wood that wasn't being used by bigger mills. My third sawmill, Seaton Forest Products is located west of Smithers, B.C. and is well-positioned to process the dry balsam logs (other mills are too far away) then easily transport them to the coast for shipping to Asia. This business was also an opportunity to provide employment opportunities to my community.

How has your business been impacted by, and adapted to, the COVID-19 pandemic?

As the mill is outdoors, we were lucky to be able to continue working during this time. However, we developed and adapted to COVID-19 restrictions (including social distancing and increased handwashing) right away to keep all our staff safe. We received federal funding, including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, which helped during difficult periods. We also received provincial funding through the Forest Enhancement Society of BC, to help transport logs from areas beyond our economic limit.

How has your experience been as a small business working on major projects such as the Coastal GasLink?

We sold the Coastal GasLink pipeline parts for about a year. Coastal GasLink projects are a small percentage of our work but gave us a much-needed boost when prices for our products were low. Our employees and community have been very supportive of this partnership.

How does environmental sustainability and responsible development fit into your business?

We have a sustainable business model that exclusively uses dry, dead balsam left behind by other mills and create a useful product. If we weren't using this dry wood it would otherwise be burned, damaging the environment and air quality in the community.

As a small mill, Seaton Forest Products practices responsible development by processing smaller amounts of wood per job that it provides, while other mills produce huge amounts of wood with fewer jobs per cubic meter. We can feel good about providing local employment, investing and spending money in the community and being environmentally responsible with our business practices.

How has your local community played a role in your business?

We could not have built this business without our local community and employees. Although it can be difficult finding employees, and it was initially for us, we now typically employ around 25 local people, some of whom have been with us since the beginning. Many of our jobs are entry-level, and we provide on-the-job training. We are also located close to the Wet'suwet'en First Nation, who make up 75 per cent of our employees.

In addition, we partner with the local Pinnacle renewable energy plant and sell them our wood chips to further limit waste.

The Bottom Line:

- Seaton currently has 22 employees and two contractors, including two women.
- Seaton's sustainable operations process dry balsam to ship to Asia.
- Lumber prices have come back up and the company is doing well.