

Sawfilers

Training Niche Profile

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Information Clearinghouse

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Introduction

This report looks into the demand for sawfilers in northern Alberta and at the need for a local classroom training site. Most sawmills in northern Alberta have difficulty finding the sawfilers that they need. Part of the problem may be that the only institution in western Canada providing classroom training for sawfilers is the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) in Burnaby. This makes it expensive for apprentices from northern Alberta to obtain their training. While many people see a need to have sawfiler training delivered in northern Alberta, it remains questionable whether the actual demand would justify the cost of developing a new training facility.

Methods

This report is based primarily on a series of interviews with employers of sawfilers in the forest industry in Northern Alberta. Other contacts include personnel with Apprenticeship and Industry Training and the British Columbia Institute of Technology. Written sources include Advanced Education and Career Development's Occupational Profiles and "Update: Apprenticeship News" from the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board.

Job Description

Sawfilers play important roles in sawmills and other forestry operations, keeping saws and knives well maintained. They "repair, set and sharpen band saw, chain saw, handsaw, circular saw and other types of saw blades." Sawfilers may also work with other tradespeople to align saws. The use of high tech equipment such as computers and lasers is common in this field. (AECD Occupational Profiles)

Training Requirements

Formal training for sawfilers is provided through an apprenticeship program. This is a four-year program with four weeks out of each year being classroom training. All Alberta apprentices currently do their classroom training at the BCIT in Burnaby.

Many sawfilers in northern Alberta have been trained on the job, without any classroom instruction or other formal sawfiling training.

Training Location

Apprenticeship and Industry Training feel that it is more cost-effective to train Albertans at BCIT than to establish a training centre here. BCIT has a million-dollar-plus facility and a solid reputation within the industry. One contact reported that their apprentices have returned “in awe” of the facilities at BCIT.

Not everyone agrees on the effect of having apprenticeship training take place so far away. The smaller mills contacted in this study are more likely to suggest that the location of the classroom training is a factor in the short supply of sawfilers in the region. The expense of travelling to, and living in, the lower mainland is one deterrent for local employees. The distance from home is also a problem for many workers who may have families or other responsibilities such as farms which prevent them from being away from home for a month at a time. In contrast to this view, one contact from a larger mill pointed out that some apprentices welcome the chance to go to the Vancouver area for a month each year.

Training Demand

- According to Dennis Reid, Head of Saw Trades at BCIT, his institution sees about 150 sawfiler apprentices in one year. In 1997-98, approximately 30 of those were from Alberta. These figures are totals for all four years of the program.
- The Apprenticeships and Industry Training Board has a total of eleven northern Albertans currently registered as sawfiler apprentices (all four years).
- Contrary to some reports, BCIT does not have long waiting lists to get into their program. There is a waiting list for third year apprentices but not for other years.
- Many of those working as sawfilers without any formal training would likely enter an apprenticeship program if the classroom component were available within Alberta.

Employment Demand Outlook

- According to AECD’s Occupational Profiles the outlook for employment in this field in Alberta is “above average”.
- The northern mills contacted for this survey expect the number of sawfilers that they employ to remain steady or grow slightly over the next two or three years.
- The rate of employee turnover in this occupation is low. Many of those interviewed reported having had employees stay for 10 to 20 years.
- One of the stronger growth areas over the next few years may be Oriented Strandboard (OSB) mills. The OSB mills contacted do not currently have sawfilers on staff but they see a need for them in the future as they expand and or increase the intricacy of their operations.
- Sawfilers are among the most difficult of tradespeople to recruit. Most of those who have had to hire sawfilers in the past few years state that it is extremely difficult to find

- qualified applicants. One mill just hired a journeyman sawfiler after a year of recruiting. Another mill recently hired someone who was not qualified but who was willing to learn on the job. The mill needed someone and could not wait until a journeyman applied.
- It should be noted that not all employers have had, or anticipate having, difficulty hiring sawfilers. One employer pointed out that the recent downturn in the BC forest industry has led to layoffs there, making more sawfilers available to Alberta companies.

Summary

Having a training facility in northern Alberta would almost certainly lead to an increase in the number of sawfiler apprentices in Alberta over the current 30 or so. A large part of that growth would come from the North. The exact magnitude of that growth is difficult to gauge, though the total figure would not likely reach beyond 50.

At current demand levels, industries in Alberta would absorb the increased supply of sawfilers, apprentice and journeyman, that a local training program would provide. This is a volatile industry though, and future demand levels are difficult to predict. For example, further lay-offs in British Columbia could change the supply/demand balance in Alberta.

The viability of a sawfiler program in northern Alberta would depend upon the support of local industries. Any saw trades program in Alberta would have to match the standards established by BCIT. Building equivalent facilities would cost over \$1 million. A second, less expensive, option would be to ask local forest companies to allow the use of their facilities for training purposes. Those contacts who were asked about this said that their companies would probably offer material support to a sawfiler training centre but in most cases, any commitment to this would have to come from higher up in their companies.

Sources

Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, “Occupational Profiles: Sawfiler”,
<http://www.aecd.gov.ab.ca>

Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board, “Update: Apprenticeship News”,
January ‘98

Contacts

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