

Eight Fathom Cabin

Economic Recovery

By Judy Suing, Public Affairs Specialist, Tongass National Forest

Hard times are no stranger to Wes Tyler, owner of Icy Straits Lumber and Milling in Hoonah. He has seen the number of local timber jobs in the community drop dramatically since the 1990s. In an effort to save the remaining timber jobs in the area, Tyler and his wife, Susan, purchased the town's ailing lumber mill in 2003. Despite difficulties obtaining a loan, the couple persisted because they felt compelled to provide employment opportunities to the residents.

Times continue to be hard for the family-owned mill. "Every day is very much a struggle, but we are working non-stop to keep our people employed," said Tyler.

Icy Straits Lumber and Milling was able to keep employees on its payroll, thanks to a Forest Service contract to build Eight Fathom Cabin. The contract was funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

"This contract came at a critical time," Tyler said. "[Staffing] got very thin just before. We were having to lay people off, so this was a real big boost." Ultimately, 15 employees from the company worked on constructing the recreation cabin.

In addition to providing jobs for the local economy, the cabin's construction also served as a tourist attraction. The cabin was constructed at the ferry terminal in Hoonah to allow visitors to see their tax dollars, and the employees those dollars funded, at work. This brought additional recognition to the company and sent a strong message about the impact of the economic recovery on

local businesses like Icy Straits.

"This mill is an opportunity to provide jobs to the community and make use of the great timber here," said Tyler.

The timber resources in Hoonah are what really spark Tyler's passion, "It's always rewarding to build something out of material that you cut yourself. When I'm cutting down a tree, I like to picture in my mind all of the products that tree will become."

From the locally-cut yellow cedar and spruce logs, Tyler and his crew expertly crafted the Eight Fathom cabin using four-by-six squared timbers. The 16-by-20 foot shelter is complete with a stove, table, benches, bunks, and a full loft, providing a cozy place to relax after a long day of hunting, fishing, or exploring along the road network that is adjacent to the cabin.

The pride that went into building the cabin is evident. "We like to make high value-added products out of the wood here – that is our vision and goal. Fundamentally, that's the only way our business is going to survive here."

It is this commitment to value-added wood production that will not only help create economically diverse economies in Southeast



Wes Tyler, owner of Icy Straits Lumber and Milling, talks about the spruce and yellow cedar logs that were locally harvested, processed, and used to construct Eight Fathom recreation cabin in Hoonah.

Alaska, but it is also a critical step in transitioning the Tongass away from old growth harvesting to young growth management.

As a good neighbor to Southeast communities, the Tongass has a role to play in providing more projects that encourage local harvesting, processing, and selling of wood. The Eight Fathom Cabin is a great start.

In the meantime, Tyler remains optimistic about new projects for his business. He points out that the road network at Eight Fathom Bight is large enough to accommodate additional cabins which can serve both subsistence and recreation users.