

Logger tries a gentler touch

John Myers
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FLOODWOOD, Minn. (AP) — Mike Zauhar doesn't want to be the last logger left in the woods of southern St. Louis County, and he's not going down quietly.

For years, Zauhar has been on a mission trying to help small-time loggers like himself make a buck and keep their communities from withering away.

Last week, he led St. Louis County officials on a tour of the 150-acre Floodwood School Forest, where he has been experimenting with logging techniques that increase production and timber values while helping wildlife and being gentler on the land.

"If we can help local loggers, it helps the town, the whole county ... and we can help the birds and wildlife. Everybody wins," Zauhar says with a preacher-like zeal. "We don't need to go to Europe to learn forestry ideas. ... We want it so Europeans are coming here to learn."

A third-generation logger, Zauhar showed county commissioners and others how he uses eight wheels instead of four on his logging tractor to soften the footprint of the big John Deere.

The extra effort cost Zauhar about \$20,000 more. But it also has extended his logging season by allowing him to work under more adverse conditions.

The extra wheels also greatly reduce soil erosion and compaction, although it was tougher on the machine at first. With the help of Industrial Welders in

Duluth, Zauhar designed a stronger part to handle the extra stress.

"If we don't innovate, we won't survive," he said. "We need to share our ideas."

Zauhar already has persuaded the county to adopt new management techniques on its nearly 900,000 acres of forested land. He encouraged thinning red pine plantations to get some cash off the land, open the forest to more sunlight for the remaining trees and encourage new growth on the ground.

The result has been more value for the county from the same amount of land, more work for loggers and better habitat for wildlife. This year, on Zauhar's suggestion, the county packaged several red pine thinning contracts into a single five-year project covering more than 500 acres to make it more appealing to loggers. The young pines — too small for sawmills — are sold as biomass fuel to create electricity. And the big project gave the high-bidding logger five seasons of guaranteed work.

"There are some things we can't control. We can't pick and choose who we sell to; that has to be by public auction," said Jason Meyer, land manager for southern St. Louis County. "But if we can make some changes, try some new things, it might help the independent logger. We need guys like (Zauhar) or we lose a link in the chain that keeps the whole (wood products) system going."

In an area of the school forest where Zauhar logged a thick stand of aspen a few years ago, he explained how he left more

than half the trees standing. The result is a tall canopy of old aspen and a thriving understory of younger balsam, spruce and hardwoods. The mixed forest was teaming with newly arrived migrating birds last week.

Anna Peterson, a Natural Resources Research Institute bird researcher, pointed out the songs of warblers, ovenbirds, chickadees, white-throated sparrows and a yellow bellied sapsucker. The forest was perfect, multilayered habitat for species of concern like the sparrow, which migrate from South America and which are declining in number.

"If you're looking for diversity, this is it," Peterson said of the patch of school forest. "Nature used to create areas like this all the time before we got in the way."

While dwindling demand and prices for wood products have been an international issue during the global recession, Zauhar said managing the supply of wood and how it's harvested might help ease some of the problem loggers face.

Zauhar has supporters and critics in the wood products community. He helped organize events in 2003 and 2004 to draw attention to the declining prices small logging operations were getting for wood, and he has helped spur the county to sponsor another loggers forum June 30. "He's persistent and some people don't like that," said Steve Raukar, county commissioner from Hibbing. "He thinks of himself as an innovator and he's got some good ideas and some that don't carry water. But he's out there trying."

