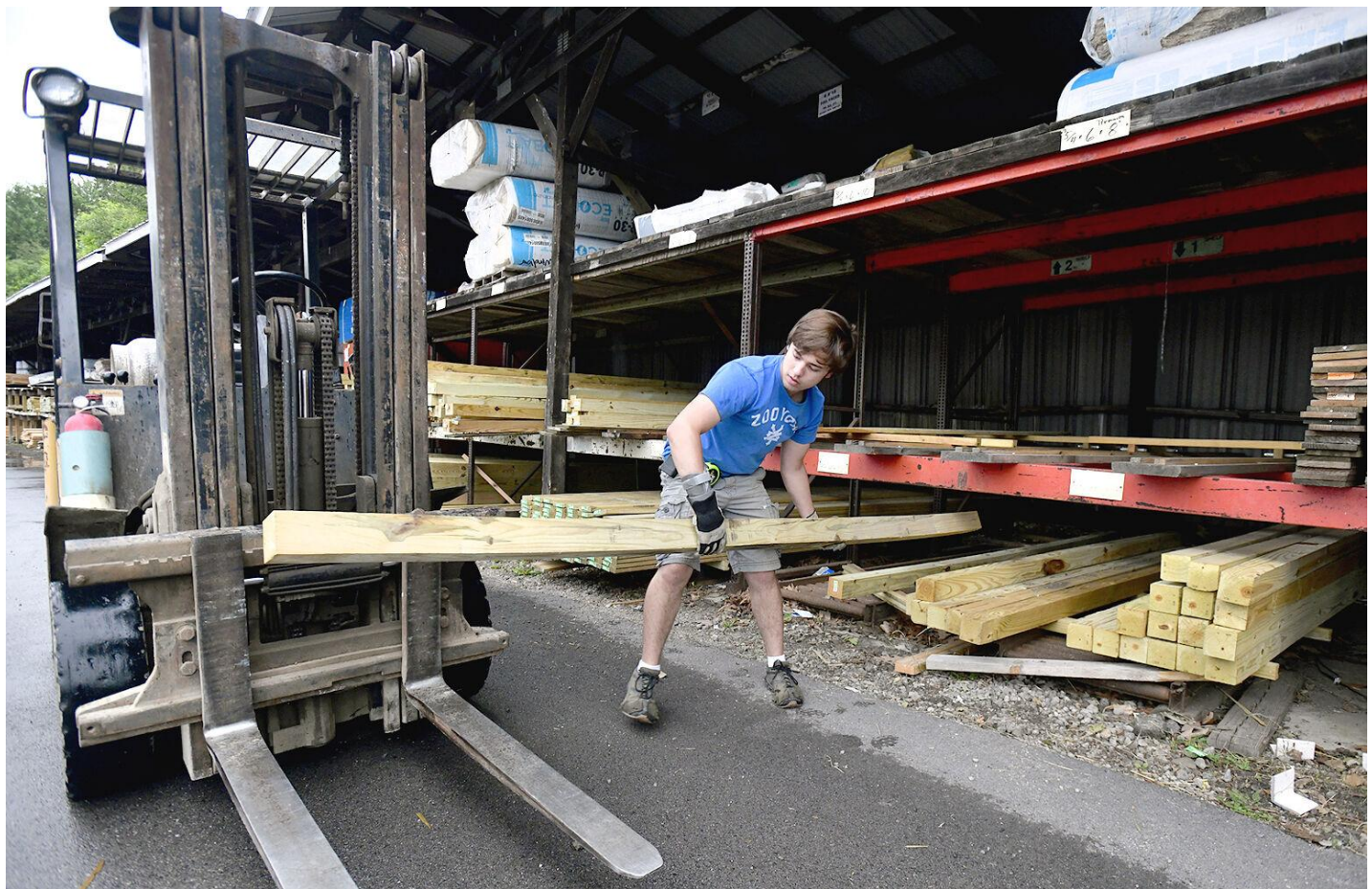


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FEATURED

Building concerns: Lumber shortage a 'strange disaster' amid COVID-19

By Russ O'Reilly
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Dylan Panetti, a yard worker at Fluder Builder Supply, 15 Hagevo Road, Windber, pulls out treated deck posts for a customer.

By Todd Berkey
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The lumber industry is seeing increased demand and scarce supply resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It’s a strange disaster,” Moxham Lumber Vice President Brad Gordon said.

He traced the lumber shortage to a lack of harvesting of softwood pines in the South last winter in tandem with the emergence of the novel coronavirus.

Gordon said he believes supply may lag behind demand until winter, or at least after deck season passes.

Company President Rick Hayes said loggers curtailed tree harvests, anticipating that the pandemic would slow demand.

“In fact, it was just the opposite,” he said. “People were sitting around with nothing to do and a whole lot of government money handed to them.”

He said loggers stumbled in supplying lumber to treatment plants.

All softwood lumber is in short supply – and treated lumber especially – Hayes said.

Treated lumber is particularly scarce in part because it must pass through a chemical process at a treatment plant to make it resistant to weather and insects. Untreated lumber can be made available to the public quicker, Hayes said.

“Our main source for treated lumber at one point was 1,200 trucks behind, and they can only treat 60 trucks of lumber a day,” Hayes said. “... They are still not caught up.”

‘Treat it themselves’

The cost of all untreated framing lumber has gone up 50% since February or March, Hayes said, while the cost of treated lumber increased at least 50%.

“It’s a mess. Fortunately it hasn’t caused too many delays of projects,” he said. “We’ve managed to scrape together what we could for contractors. ... But we may only supply part of a project, then contractors have to go find the rest somewhere else.”

Lumber pricing has been erratic for years, said Jon O’Brien, executive director of the Keystone Contractors Association.

“We’re experiencing lumber prices that have been jumping all over the place since 2015,” he said. “Then came 2020, and like everything else in this country, we’re bracing for the unexpected when it comes to lumber pricing. So far in 2020, pricing appears to be in line, with a modest increase. However, I am hearing from more and more contractors that there is a shortage.”

O’Brien said the shortage is delaying delivery and altering some construction schedules.

“To date, the schedule adjustments have not been drastic,” he said, “at least not on the commercial construction side.”

In Richland Township, zoning and building codes officer Rian Barker said he is seeing people build decks on their homes with untreated lumber because treated lumber is not available.

“I haven’t seen too many home projects happening, but there is a shortage of treated lumber,” he said, “and so, for the projects that have been going on, people have been using untreated lumber. It’s a difference for how long it can last outside.

“I guess they are going to treat it themselves with stains,” he said.

‘Rationing supply’

Chet Fluder, president of Fluder Builder Supply in Windber, has been selling lumber to retailers and contractors for more than 60 years.

“We are buying as much as we are allocated from the treatment plants, which are rationing supply,” he said. “The shortage happened somewhere in the supply chain – whether it was at treatment plants or mills – because they are all over the country.”

Although he had ordered a heavy winter inventory, that supply has been dwindling.

“There’s been a combination of short supply and overwhelming demand, and prices are increasing accordingly,” he said. “Some things are 30 to 40% higher.”

At Moxham Lumber, Gordon said delivery trucks arrive sporadically and with “mystery” products.

“You get a truck, whenever it shows up, with whatever, and you just kind of make it work,” he said. “It’s terrible for customers who need certain lengths.

“So we’re cutting and ripping whatever comes down to what the customer needs. And it’s silly because you are wasting lumber. ... And you can’t set your price books because with each shipment the price keeps going up.”

The pandemic has decreased demand, however, for hardwood species of lumber, sawmill operators said. It was another blow to the industry that had already been affected by tariffs by China on U.S. hardwood exports.

D&D Wood Sales President Bernie Dumm has been operating his saw mill in Cambria County for 25 years.

“There’s no demand,” he said. “Dollars are way too low even in good times for anyone to start a new business in this industry.”

He said much of his lumber is made into a crates and pallets for shipping freight. Dumm drew a connection between the lack of demand for industrial lumber and the months long suspension of car manufacturing amid COVID-19.

‘Hot and cold’

WBL Hardwoods in Cambria County is a sawmill division of Bingaman & Son Lumber that produces lumber from hardwood trees, including cherry, oak and soft maple.

The company produces industrial lumber for railroad ties and blocking for freight pallets as well as grade lumber for items such as cabinets and molding.

Grade lumber was impacted first by the trade wars with China that started in 2018, said Tyler Shields, quality, health, safety and environmental director for the company.

“We saw the export market slowing down,” he said.

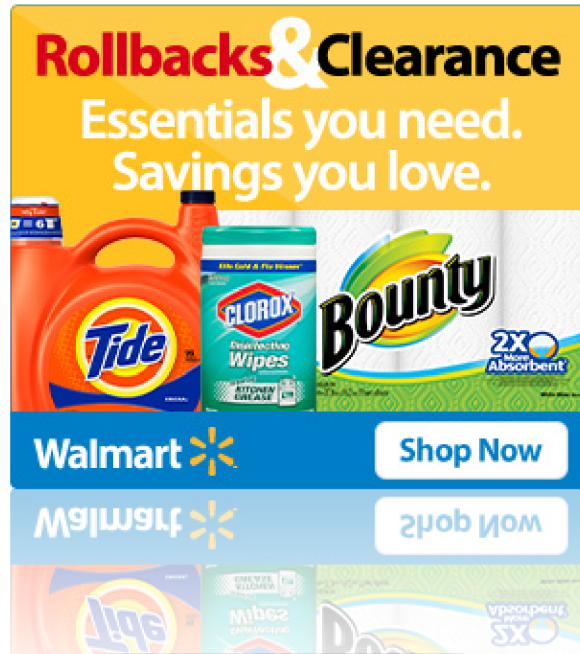
So the hardwood market shifted to domestic, industrial usage.

“The domestic economy hadn’t been impacted by COVID-19 yet, but what happened since then is a record number of trains sitting on sidelines – not a lot of freight needs to be moved,” he said.

“So now, whether it’s for shipping cars or anything, there’s just less of a need for industrial grade lumber, too.”

But, he said the hardwood industry is resilient.

“It will rebound,” he said. “But markets are hot and cold.”



Russ O'Reilly is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. Follow him on Twitter @RussellOReilly.

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SUNUV 48W UV LED Light Lamp
(3055)
\$49.99 \$49.99 / Count

The image shows a white, dome-shaped UV LED light lamp with a purple interior. The brand name 'SUNUV' and the model number '3055' are visible on the top. Below the image, the product name 'SUNUV 48W UV LED Light Lamp' is listed, followed by the model number '(3055)' and the price '\$49.99 \$49.99 / Count'. There is a small yellow square icon to the right of the price.

Russ O'Reilly

