

Ihe Vermont State Fair is an extravaganza of carnival rides, livestock shows, demolition derbies, harness racing, live music, yummy junk food, art exhibits, vegetable and pie competitions, pulling contests, and magic acts. It's also known for its exhibition halls that highlight the state's agricultural and natural resource heritage.

Among these exhibition halls stands the Forestry Building, where thousands of visitors pass through during the Fair's 10-day run each September. Vermont forestry professionals love this opportunity to combine their outreach efforts and welcome fairgoers with hands-on displays about Vermont's trees and forests.

"It's a cooperative venture of forestry professionals and the forest-products industry," says Kathy Beland, a consulting forester and the 2008 Forestry Building chairperson. Gary Salmon, a forester recently retired from the State and one of the building's creators, adds: "We are colorful and full of active displays; we have a children's day that draws 800 kids and a building that's attractively designed to get the forestry message out to our visitors."

That message: well-managed forests are a keystone of Vermont's economy. The wealth of Vermont is in its forests and the people who own and use them.

"Our goal," explains Beland, "is to educate the public on the different ways we draw on the forest, how we manage it, what we need to know, and how to do it. We want people to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem."

Many of today's Vermonters find it hard to imagine the state largely treeless, as it was in the 1800s, when it was mostly farmland. "It's harder still," says Salmon, "to visualize the process that has restored the Vermont landscape to a forest that now covers more than 80 percent of the area" – and contributes more than \$1 billion to the state's economy every year.

"We provide information that encourages the public to make good choices," says Beland. "This may be the decision to burn wood instead of oil or to make sure they don't carry campfire wood across state lines, which minimizes the spread of forest insects or diseases. It could be whether to actively manage their own forest for timber or to focus on wildlife habitat."

The project was initiated in 1996 by Rutland County Forester Jim Philbrook, now retired. Back then, he was promoting Vermont woodlands through a portable display called "Vermont Forests for You," first set up in the old Rutland Mall and later in the Fair's 4-H Building. After noticing an underutilized building on the Fairgrounds, he approached Ed Congdon, president of the Fair Association, about sharing space in the building. Congdon offered the whole thing.

Philbrook promptly rounded up donations from local forest-

products companies, plus helping hands from the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FP&R), Vermont tree farmers, and the Vermont Woodlands Association, among others, to enclose and prep the building. Ever since, it has hosted displays from groups ranging from Vermont Coverts to the Moosalamoo National Recreation Area.

"Overall," says Philbrook, "I'm pleased with the number of people who come through and the amount of time they spend. Some visitors come a second and third time during Fair week, and some return each year to revisit displays they saw last year."

For this reason, the team balances the display mix between new and permanent. "It slowly became more interactive," says Beland, "with quizzes and scavenger hunts, as well as a kid's forest and activities such as chainsaw safety demonstrations. Smokey Bear also makes at least one annual visit.

A recurring display that compares the cost of heating with wood, oil, and biomass draws an ever-bigger crowd annually. Nearby, a tabletop miniforest of fireplace-sized logs challenges fairgoers to "name that tree" using just bark and wood grain for clues. Supplemental displays explain the heat-value differences between species.

Highlights of the human history that has taken place during a maple's long lifetime are written on boards sawn from the tree. Beside it, a stump is repacked with milled wood to illustrate how much lumber comes from a tree. In a corner, amid a collection of vintage chainsaws and antique logging tools, visitors can watch videos about old-time logging.

Outside, a class from nearby Stafford Technical Center learns to operate a Wood-Mizer sawmill, which they'll use to make portable skidder bridges. Inside, youngsters gather nuts and explore a hollow tree to discover what lives there. Their parents, meanwhile, pick up trail maps, park brochures, and resource booklets, and ask such questions as, "How do you tell the difference between a red and white oak?" or "What could have killed my blue spruce?"

The volunteer team, composed of FP&R personnel, independent foresters, arborists, and forest landowners, help staff and maintain the building during the Fair. "Having someone available during every hour the Fair is open creates a living link between natural-resource professionals and visitors interested in Vermont's forests," Salmon says.

Which means that, by the close of the Fair, the volunteers are all pretty tired. Despite that, says Beland, "We always have a meeting the next day to clean up and review how we accomplished our goals. It usually starts out with things we did wrong – but by the end of the meeting, we are all excited about next year."

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Forestry at the Fair

BY CAROLYN HALEY