SAWMILLS: MFPC Legislative Breakfast, 1/30/2020 - Catherine Robbins-Halstead, manager and co-owner, Robbins Lumber in Searsmont. She is part of the fifth generation to run this family-owned mill.

I would like to talk to you about climate change and how sawmills can impact it positively. A critical mass of the growing public wants action on climate change. This has changed dramatically over the last 10 years. A solid majority of all age groups are worried about global warming. In the 18-34 age group 7 out of 10 are concerned. Everyone is talking about climate change, carbon and greenhouse gases (GHG).

The building industry is a large contributor of GHG. More than 8% of all GHG today have come from steel and concrete. They are great materials but they have a high energy cost to extract, produce and move with high GHG emissions in their processes’ and, producing them uses finite non-renewable resources.

While a tree is growing it is using carbon dioxide and producing oxygen. If it burns or falls to the forest floor and decays it releases that carbon back. However, if that tree is converted into something – lumber (because I run a sawmill) – it stores that carbon.
Wood is 50% carbon and is highly renewable and sustainable. One cubic metric ton of timber stores one ton of carbon.

By 2050 we will be adding 2.3 billion people. That is 80 million people per year – the equivalent of a new United States every 4 years. They will all need homes. These homes can be made out of wood. A 20-story building of wood grows every 13 minutes in North America. The average wooden urban house can store 48 metric tons of carbon.

A mid-rise timber building can store 318 metric tons of carbon and house multiple families. Through adoption of urban wood building the climate carbon curve can trend down.

Compare a 20-story building out of concrete to wood. The concrete building emits more than 1,200 tons of carbon, the same building in wood stores over 3,100 tons of carbon. That is a net difference of 4,300 tons of carbon. The difference between a 20-story building made out of concrete versus one made out of wood is the equivalent of 900 cars removed from the road for a year.

As a manufacturer, Robbins Lumber and other sawmills are extremely efficient green producers with virtually no waste. During our harvesting of trees, the branches and tree tops are used for biomass, which we burn in our co-generation power plant. We use that heat to generate steam to dry our lumber, heat our buildings and produce up to 8.5 MW of power.

Once the log reaches the mill and the bark is removed, we sell that bark to landscapers. After the log is sawn into our main products boards, we sell the sawdust generated to farmers for bedding and pellet manufacturers.

The slabs that are too small to go into boards are chipped up and sold to paper mills. The boards are then dried using steam heat from the power plant and then planed smooth. The shavings that are generated during planing are bagged for horse bedding.

Any larger pieces that are too small to be a board go to be burned in the power plant. The ash from the power plant goes to farmers for enriching their fields or is used for road building.

So, what do we as sawmills need to succeed to keep producing wood to fight climate change?

We all know Maine is one of the most expensive places to do business. We have high energy costs, high insurance costs, the oldest population etc. The last legislative session there were over 1600 bills – almost 800 were special interests asking for something.
These all cost money and lead to the unknown as to what it is going to be like to do business in Maine. We need stability.

The last legislative session there were workers comp changes. I urge you to resist any additional changes to the system. Many justified the changes because costs to employers had gone down since the Blue-Ribbon Workers Comp reform of the 1990s, when state government had shut down because every insurer had left the state of Maine because workers comp had gotten so expensive.

It is true costs have come down, but the reason they’ve gone down is because of improvements employers made by spending on safety programs and investing in safety systems, training and technology such as robots to do injury prone jobs. Any savings that might have been realized were eradicated by the increases in medical insurance. Last year Robbins Lumber spent almost $1 million dollars on health insurance.

A very important item for our industry is the timber resource. We encourage easements, such as the 22,000-acre easement we established at Nicatous Lake. The land is forever conserved and we harvest the wood sustainably, while forever protecting it from development.

We want conservation of the timber supply. Conservation is the wise use of the resource not preservation, which is no use of the resource.

At Robbins Lumber we have 128 employees. They are all working in foundational jobs. These are jobs that pay well, have benefits, supports families and brings money to Maine. Over the last two years, we invested over $40 million dollars in our company.

As the governor has said we are Maine not Washington. We need to pull together to create a place where we have a future for our children and grandchildren.