

PRESS RELEASES

The Mount St. Helens Forest Learning Center

By Jack E. Bedwell

It was fifteen years ago the mountain exploded into a massive eruption, sending tons of ash, rock and highly charged gases over the surrounding 13 miles, later to be named the "blast zone." Thousands of trees were literally blown down, as though a giant woodsman was swinging a huge scythe and couldn't control his actions. Almost 150,000 acres of privately owned, state and federal forests were devastated.

Many people believed that the forests were completely destroyed, because of nature's devastating force. There were many others who believed the forests would renew with man's helping nature.

Weyerhaeuser Company, which has owned and managed the St. Helens Tree Farm since 1900, was the largest private landowner impacted by the eruption. Of the nearly 68,000 acres, about 14 percent of the tree farm was devastated.

Quick action was necessary to salvage the downed timber because of the risk of disease and insect damage to the fallen timber. More than 1,000 people were involved. During peak summer periods more than 600 truckloads of salvaged logs were removed each day. By November 1982 this phase of the recovery was largely complete. The result? 850 million board feet of timber was saved — enough to build 85,000 three bedroom homes.

Within two years after the eruption, Weyerhaeuser began a reforestation program, which continues today. In total 18.4 million trees were planted on over 45,500 acres. Ten years after the eruption some individual trees were well over 35 feet tall. To better acquaint the general public with the terrible havoc caused by the eruption, and the tireless efforts to rebuild nature's destruction, the Mount St. Helens Forest Learning Center was planned and built for the sole purpose of showing what was, and is, happening to the forest.

The official grand opening on May 18, 1995, was exactly 15 years after the mighty blast. Over four hundred people attended this event and enjoyed the music program. VIP speakers, including Washington's governor, Mike Lowry, with George H. Weyerhaeuser, chairman of the Board of Weyerhaeuser, cut the ribbon, officially opening the massive, magnificent Forest Learning Center.

The weather was quite cool. The fog, or clouds shrouded Mount St. Helens. The large elk herd was not visible from the overlook outside the Center. In spite of the weather, everyone was sincerely impressed by the exceptional displays, especially the Eruption Chamber. I observed some of the people coming out of the viewing, shaking their heads in disbelief, as to what they had just witnessed. I am sure their memory of the events leading up to, and after the mighty explosion, will be etched in their minds forever! The personnel of the Washington State Department of Transportation, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the Weyerhaeuser Company on duty at the Center, did an outstanding job of escorting and explaining the various exhibits. When first stepping into the entrance of the Center, it feels like you are walking on a sponge. Actually the flooring in the entry area and the protective surfacing on the

children's playground's volcano contains recycled rubber tires. Many of the objects on display in the Eruption Chamber are items salvaged and reused in creating this unique environment. The display cases and cabinets were made out of fiber wood which is made from wood scraps. Old timber was salvaged from a local mill facility being dismantled, and was used with laminated beams in the building's structural system. Other building materials included second-growth lumber, strandboard and hardboard made from scraps or chips and wood paneling made from red alder.

The center's construction, site development, rest rooms, and the playground are the results of a public and private partnership between the Washington State Department of Transportation, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Weyerhaeuser Company. Weyerhaeuser provided all the exhibits within the facility. The company will also be responsible for staffing and managing the facility.

What this impressive facility does, is explain what happened to the forests at Mount St. Helens during and after the eruption. Forests are returning. Some lands were replanted and others left alone to return through natural processes. Forest management today provides for wildlife habitat, resource protection and timber production for wood and paper products. And finally, how we can all work together to manage forest resources.

The Forest Learning Center expresses a northwest mountain lodge character appropriate to this viewpoint overlooking the Toutle River mud flow. The building's character is achieved through the use of heavy timber trusses and protective, steeply sloped roof overhangs. An outdoor deck provides a view of the valley. The building design includes recycled and reused materials, and innovative wood products to conserve forest resources. Full-scale dioramas, scents-surround environments, multi-media technology, hands-on interaction, and stunning photo murals combine to tell the story of what happened to the region's forests and how they are returning. The displays address conservation of forest resources, reuse and recycling of wood and paper products. Formations, Inc., of Portland Oregon, designed the 6,000 square foot exhibit entitled "Return of the Forests".