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History of Forestry in the Wood Buffalo Region

Forestry in Alberta has grown substantially over the past fifty years to become the third largest industry, behind energy and agriculture. This growth has come about due to the high quality of Albertan timber and forest products and increased demand for fibre for pulp and paper products.

The first sawmill in the Fort McMurray area was built in the early 1900s by Bill Gordon, an adventurer on his way to the Klondike who decided to stay in Fort McMurray. Gordon and his associates harvested logs along the Clearwater River and floated them downriver to the mill, which was situated near the Hangingstone River (Northland 2008).

In 1964, Roy Ewashko came to Fort McMurray and established a small portable mill along the west side of the Athabasca River. The mill operated only during the winter months, and with thirty employees, could saw only about 30,000 board feet (about one truckload) per day. In 1970, Roy and a partner established Northland Forest Products Ltd. (Northland 2008).

Development of the forest industry in northeastern Alberta accelerated with the opening of the Alberta-Pacific (Al-Pac) pulpmill, located near the town of Athabasca, in 1993. Today, the Fort McMurray/lower Athabasca River area supports several major facilities, including the Alberta-Pacific pulp and paper mill, a Millar Western Forest Products Ltd. sawmill, and the Northland Forest Products Ltd. sawmill. The two major sawmills, together with smaller sawmills in the area, consumed 832,000 m³ of wood in 2007, while the Al-Pac pulpmill consumed 2,725,000 m³ (AFPA and ASRD 2008). Other pulpmills are located on the Athabasca River at Hinton and Whitecourt, and on the Lesser Slave River.



Forests of the lower Athabasca region.
Source: Hatfield Consultants
(click to enlarge)



The Al-Pac pulp and paper mill near Boyle, Alberta.
Source: Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Inc.
(click to enlarge)

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