

SAWMILL FORUM

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The Virtues of Mill Cleanliness:

One of the things that the most efficient, productive, and profitable mills have in common is that they all look relatively neat and clean. In my role as a sawmill troubleshooter, I get to visit a lot of mills in the Northeast region and beyond. Most of what I do when I get there is gather data so that I can come to some sort of reasonable conclusion about what is wrong with the mill and what has to be done to fix the problem so that it can quickly get back to producing lumber that is within running tolerance and therefore saleable.

One of the things that most mills that are kept relatively neat and clean have in common is that they usually have a well executed maintenance program. You can call it preventive maintenance or predictive maintenance, it will pretty much achieve the same positive results compared to those mills where the maintenance slogan goes something like “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” That’s kind of a neat old folksy catch phrase, but in my opinion it really has no place in a production setting of any kind.

We all know that any sawmill is naturally a dirty, dusty environment--unless it isn’t running. It takes a lot of forward thinking to be willing to spend what would seem to be unproductive time trying to keep one of these filthy beasts clean. But, once you buy into that program, you find out that it will in turn contribute to making the mill more productive, more efficient, and consequently more profitable.

First of all, if your mill looks like a pig sty, how much respect do you think your employees will have for you or your equipment? When employees work in a nicely kept environment, they are much more likely to adopt an attitude that is filled with pride in the company they work for, pride in the equipment they use to do their job, and pride in the work that they do. I know, a clean place is no guarantee that all of your employees will take on the right attitude, but it certainly will give you a much better chance that the employees who are capable of having a good attitude will do so. Some just won’t, no matter

what you do or how you treat them. But I don’t think those people would do any better in a dirty environment, either.

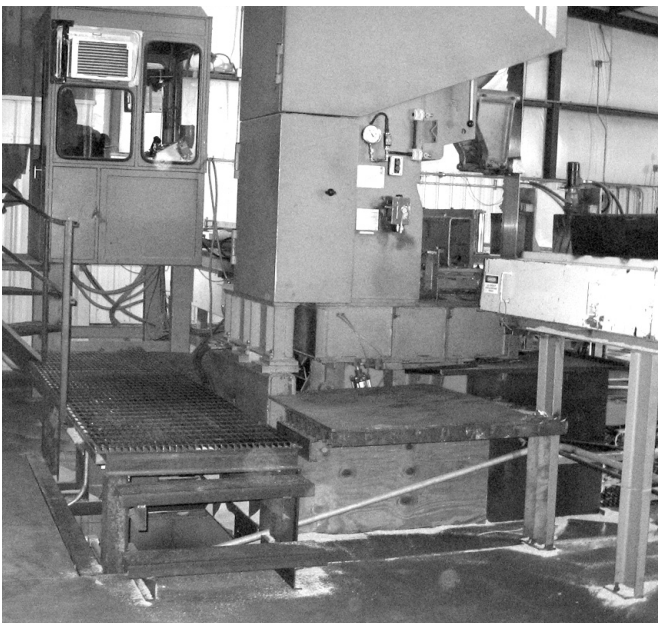
A cleaner sawmill is also more likely to be a safe sawmill: fewer tripping hazards; fewer hidden objects under piles of sawdust; fewer broken parts that go unnoticed because they are buried in sawdust. And then there are the times when you are doing some maintenance work and you drop a nut or bolt into a sawdust pile and then spend a lot of time trying to find it. And of course there is always that lost wrench that manages to hide itself in a sawdust pile never to be found again until finally out of desperation someone has to come in and perform a major cleaning operation.

We all know that there is a lot a vibration in any sawmill. This vibration can easily cause nuts and bolts to loosen up over time. If you are regularly keeping your mill clean, you will be able to notice these things before they cause a major problem or a serious safety hazard.

And let’s not forget how many switches and sensors used in a modern sawmill. If you generally try to keep the whole mill clean, you will also be able to regularly dust off all of those sensors so that they can continue to operate properly. But when dust and dirt accumulate everywhere in the mill, it almost becomes pointless to properly maintain those sensors when there is just so much sawdust everywhere. When there is that much sawdust on the floor that hasn’t been taken care of, there will consequently be even more in the air than there is in a mill that is cleaned on a regular basis.

Finally, there are things that need to move freely that won’t move as well when you allow pitch and sawdust to build up. Not only won’t they move freely, but the extra dust starts to work its way into the bearings and bushings, which will wear them out sooner instead of later. That’s not a recipe for maximum profitability, is it?

The bottom line is that things just seem to always go better at a mill that is properly maintained and kept relatively tidy.



A clean mill is a happy mill and happy mills tend to be more profitable.

Questions about sawmills and their operation should be sent to Forum, The Northern Logger, P.O. Box 69, Old Forge, NY 13420, FAX #315-369-3736.

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