

Contractors in the Poplar Fields

The Advanced Hardwood Biofuels Northwest (AHB) team started reaching out to the people who take care of our poplar farms: you and your fellow agricultural professionals. We wanted to learn from you about the poplar trees and see what we could share with you. Here is what we learned:

The workers appreciated working with trees, in addition to steady, long-term work and on-time payments. They valued crews that worked together to help less experienced workers.

"That is something with the trees I enjoy...I know that the tree is special for that land because the field that we plant today for next year will grow nice and green."

"You work in the open air, you take advantage of the wind, of the shade that the trees give you when it is hot."

"I think the most important thing is to work together, because I had to work with people who never helped me. Now...if there is one that is slow, we encourage, and we help to be at the same level as everyone."



Customers valued experienced workers who developed new processes and workers who they could trust.

"And some of them, they've been around long enough so they can pick [the clone] out and say, 'That's not this clone.' It's very impressive to me. And that's when a tree is not actively growing."

"The tree farm was a great example. When we started tracking costs per acre...for years, YEARS, because of collaboration and looking for better ways to do things, the price per acre stayed the same, actually went down in some cases, even though the salary was going up."

"I had one man here, for years and years he led the crew of gathering side branches for our stick cutting. Our management required us to go out there and look at this and inspect these sticks- we've got to have perfect quality. After a few years with this man anchoring that crew, I never looked at another stick through the cutting process. I'd just say, is he coming back to run that crew? That's all I need, meeting over."

Contractors and, in some cases, poplar producers, encouraged an open-door policy, but found that it was sometimes hard to get workers to take advantage of it.

"Sometimes there's a reluctance to have up and down the chain of command discussions, but I encouraged it as much as I could, every time that I could, and the results were very positive."

"At our supervisor training, we encourage going out and actually talking to a crew leader: how's it going? What do you think—is there anything we can change? How can we do this better? The field manager talking to the crew leader, that's when you get some ideas."



Contractors, even those who have been in the business for a long time, can take advantage of trainings and conferences! Here are some resources for you:

Through the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries:

<https://www.lni.wa.gov/TradesLicensing/Contractors/Workshops/Contractor/>

Through AgSafe in California:

<http://www.agsafe.org/fel-continuing-education/>

<http://www.agsafe.org/course-catalog-classes/>

Through wafla, the seasonal and AG employers' premier HR association:

<https://www.wafla.org/>

Through the Farm Employer Education and Legal Defense Service (FEELDS) in Oregon:

<https://oregonfb.org/feelds/>

Why do we plant poplar trees?

When we talked to workers, we found that almost none of them knew why the poplars were planted, but they wanted to know.

"We did not know what the trees were for, but what I knew was that the pay was good and the work was good and fair."

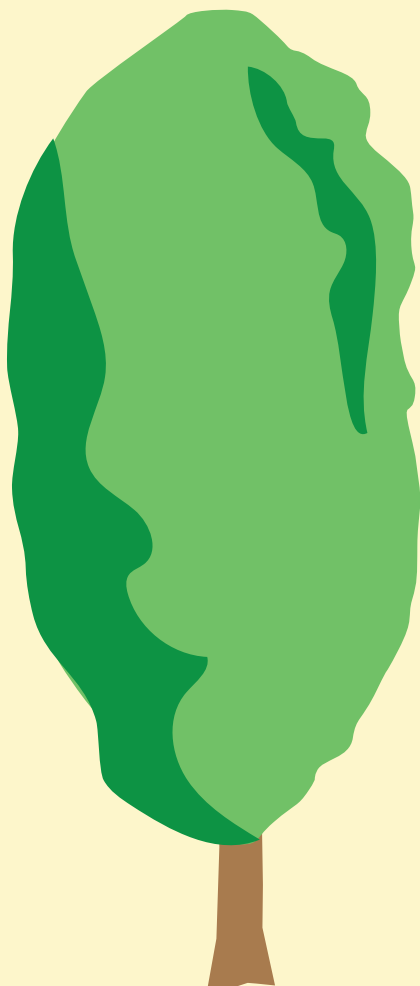
"We always call them paper trees and use them for paper and wood. We did not get to investigate much because we are all going to work. That is why we do not know much."

"I had heard a rumors that they were trying to make oil. I don't know what kind, and they didn't tell us directly, only rumors. Now it is affirmative the rumors that I listened today."

Contractors, by being the main link between the customers and the crew leaders, have a lot of control over what the workers learn in trainings. The workers were excited to learn more about the poplar trees, especially from a fellow native Spanish speaker.

"Some of the workers are more excited, have a real curiosity for [the crop] and I would think there would have been times where explaining what the goal is, that would help them improve the process."

"We are more grateful that a Latina woman like you is here with us to teach us about these important issues."



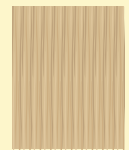
Poplars can be used for a wide variety of applications, such as:



Biofuels



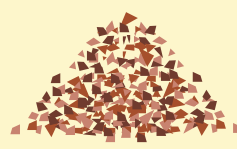
Biochemicals



Veneer



Furniture



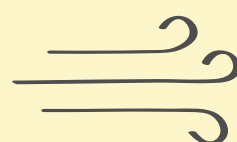
Hog Fuel



Sawdust



Kraft Paper



Oxygen



Income