

BACK INTO SERVICE

Tips on Restarting an Idled Facility

by Jason McIntosh

Let's suppose we wake up tomorrow and discover that housing market demand for wood products has increased faster than the industry can supply. What will we do to meet the demand? Under a worst case scenario, capacity would be insufficient, leaving the door open to foreign imports. Ramping up existing capacity could help bridge some of the supply and demand gap. But getting idled mills back into service will almost certainly be required at some point.

For every manufacturing plant that has been idled since the housing market downturn, there are varying levels and degrees of how they were shut down, how they have been maintained, and how they were planned to be restarted once the time came, if ever.

The facility might have been shut down with the intention of short-term closure. But who knew then when the housing market might recover? It is important, therefore, to know going in what was intended for the mill when it ceased production. Some good questions to ask might be the following:

- Are any personnel who were involved with the plant before it shut down or while it was being shut down available to discuss and review the original plan?
- Was the mill maintained and serviced while down? Was it winterized? Were bearings rolled and motors turned over? Was MCC A/C kept running? Were water systems flushed and fluid loops, such as thermal oil, hydraulic oil and cooling systems, cycled?
- Are there records of upkeep?
- Were inventories depleted to other locations, sold or kept intact?
- What is the shelf life of inventories that were kept or shelf life of items in service when shut down?

Most of the above items might seem elementary, but being thorough beforehand will save time and money on the back end.

The most important aspect of restarting a mill is safety. Do local officials and first responders, including ambulance services, fire departments and local police, know that you now plan to occupy and start work in the facility? This is vital in the event they are needed, even if it is another portion of an existing facility that is still running. A good plan might be to notify and have the agencies tour the facility beforehand to get to know the layout and personnel. Depending on how long the facility has been down, a lot could have changed around your location, including local emergency personnel, entrance roads and routes, train crossings, pipelines, or other factors that might affect response time in case of an emergency. Utility providers also should be notified of your intentions to restart an idled facility.

Fire systems need to be inspected prior to any work, and a good plan put in place to prevent or respond to a fire event. In most companies it is probably policy to have the fire detection and suppression systems online before any work, especially hot work, begins. Check your hoses, reels, nozzles and fire extinguishers and bring them up to date as well.

A good policy is to start day one practicing correct lock out/tag out procedures, hot work permitting along with confined space permitting, and other safety protocols in order to establish a safety culture from the very beginning.

After the safety items are addressed, what next? You really do not know what you have until the facility is cleaned and organized. Define the roles and responsibilities of each person involved in cleaning and organizing production areas. Cleaning will help identify conditions of motors, gearboxes, raceways in conveyors, chains, rollers, belt wear, springs, wiring and so on.

From the cleaning efforts a punch list of each area should be produced. Your basic game plan in place should include:

- Safety work with proper notifications
- Assigning responsibilities
- Cleaning
- Organizing
- Inspecting
- Documenting and reporting
- Repairing
- Inventorying parts
- Powering up islands

Some ideas on how to divide your mill up in order to work through the above-mentioned aspects can be divided into the following arrangement of equipment islands.

- Raw material receiving through prep
- Wood processing area—debarking, chipping, flaking, peeling or sawing
- Bark processing through heat energy source (furnace, boiler)
- Drying through environmental control equipment
- Screening or dry material storage
- Resin application area or blending if any through your forming or layup area (plywood, OSB, PB or MDF)
- Press for board mills and saws for sawmills
- Finishing and load out areas

Other areas to consider include:

- Pneumatic systems
- Emergency generators or back-up systems
- Unloading and loading areas
- Rolling stock equipment

There are, of course, other ways to divide up work areas and responsibilities. For example, you might organize along group lines, as follows:

- A safety group that covers all electrical inspections, fire house/fire pump conditions, loading and unloading safety devices, deluge systems, communication systems, and other safety-related items.
- A mechanical group that focuses on items such as gearbox inspections, motor inspections, bearing inspections, conveyor inspections, drag chain, furnace intervals, dryer intervals, and all other mill equipment.
- An electrical group that checks out all electrical systems.
- An operational group with responsibility for cleaning and inspecting equipment and aiding the safety, mechanical and electrical groups.

Much of how you approach the restarting process will depend on what resources you have to accomplish the task, including budget and the labor force available to you. A mix of skilled maintenance personnel with key operators and laborers is highly desired, although that ideal may not always be attainable. However, dividing up the mill into smaller areas of focus will allow for better control of the work needing to be done.

Most companies have very good guidelines for start-ups and procedures for bringing mills back online from outages or emergencies. However, our industry has seldom if ever faced the kind of

protracted curtailment of the last few years, so there is little in the way of established procedures for getting idled facilities back into service. Establishing those key procedures and defining roles and responsibilities before you get started can make for a more successful restart.

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