

Northland Power Chips

As *Western Mariner* motored along the Telegraph Cove road that traverses the bluffs on the southeastern shore of Beaver Cove on the last day of November '09, there was the SEASPAN CHIEF manoeuvring the empty chipper, SEASPAN 550, in under the barge-loading spout at Northland Power Chips. In 2003 Northland Power Corp, owner of the facility, installed a state-of-the art wood chipping machine capable of annually producing 450,000 cu. m. of wood chips and hog fuel from wood waste and debris left on the forest floor after harvest. The plan was to install a hog fuel-fired electric power cogeneration plant on the site but that project is on hold. Meanwhile the chipper chips on and Seaspan tugs take the tandem tows of hog fuel (the loader can fill two barges in 10-12 hours) to pulp mills on the Gulf of Georgia. The coastal pulp mills used to procure their fibre economically in the form of the residual wood chip by-products of the coastal sawmills. With the steady closing down of the latter the residual chip supply has all but dried up, thus the viability of chipping facilities like Northland's. The ISLAND CHIEF was launched for Island Tug & Barge of Victoria in 1967 by the McKay-Cormack shipyard in Victoria and became the SEASPAN CHIEF when IT&B and Vancouver Tug Boat were merged to form Seaspan International in 1970. The SEASPAN 550 and its three sisters, the 551, 552 and 553 have the distinction of being the first vessels to be built in China by a North American tug and barge company. In 1998 they were delivered by the Yangzijiang Shipyard (near Shanghai) along with the FRT #3, a covered paper products barge for Fraser River Terminals, and the five were towed from Shanghai to Vancouver Harbour by the SEASPAN COMMODORE (see *Barges in the News* in *The Westcoast Mariner*, September 1998). Measuring 212' x 50.5' x 13' the 550-series chip barges are the largest built to date by Seaspan and have a 3000-ton capacity. They are also the first Seaspan chippers to be fitted with steel box walls; Vancouver Shipyards and Victoria Shipyards each completed two box wall installations on the 550s.



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Port Alice mill's "edge"

Through all the ups and downs of the coastal pulp and paper mills, the mill at Port Alice (photo left) has been a continuous producer of pulp since 1918. Neucel, a company of the Wellspring Capital investment group of New York which buys distressed companies, has invested over \$200 million since purchasing the mill in early 2006 and will likely sell the mill when the time is right. In the meantime the Port Alice mill keeps on turning because it has "an edge" (according to a Neucel representative) – it produces specialty cellulose pulp as its sole product. The sulphite pulp dissolves

into a paste in water and is used in the manufacture of a vast array of products, to name just a few: gel caps, LCD computer screens, explosives, cigarette filters, food thickeners. This is all against the backdrop of the decreasing world demand for newsprint which has put other BC mills behind the eight-ball. The Neucel mill uses exclusively hemlock and balsam logs of which there is a plentiful supply. Most of the fibre comes on the Seaspan log barges, some in log tows from Quatsino Sound and the mill does its own log chipping. Main customers for the sulphite pulp are in China, Japan, Taiwan, southern US, Europe. Interestingly the pulp-making process has a red liquor by-product known as SSL (spent sulphite liquor) which can be used to make ethanol which, in turn, will buy the mill carbon credits when the economics are favourable for its production.

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