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Maine Woods Company to expand workforce with training assistance provided by NMCC through Maine Quality Centers

Aroostook County - Plans to grow the workforce at Maine Woods Company in Portage Lake got a boost today as officials with the company and Northern Maine Community College signed an agreement to provide customized training to new hires at no cost.

The memorandum of understanding signed at a press conference held on the NMCC campus calls for the continuing education division of the College, in collaboration with the Maine Quality Centers, to provide education and training for as many as 11 new Maine Woods Company employees over a seven month period, beginning this month. The contract work represents a joint initiative by the College and Maine Quality Centers program, representing a \$35,000 value toward the workforce development and expansion of the Aroostook County facility.

“Maine Woods Company is excited to work with Northern Maine Community College and Maine Quality Centers to provide training to our new employees. By upgrading the skills of our employees, it will allow them to advance within the company, resulting in higher wages, and will ensure they remain employed in the area,” said Gerard Charette, Jr., human resource and safety manager for Maine Woods Company. “We are pleased that NMCC will provide training onsite to our staff; this is especially convenient for our newly hired workers. This sort of program is a win-win situation; employees benefit with better skills, higher wages and the opportunity for advancement, and the company benefits by retaining highly skilled employees who will produce high quality products. This is most important in remaining competitive in our industry.”

Specifically, the understanding forges a partnership between Maine Woods Company and NMCC, whereby the continuing education division of the College will facilitate training for company employees in various areas identified as critical to the company's growth. Examples include sessions in hardwood lumber grading, high pressure boiler training, saw filing training, and computerized accounting software training.

"We are pleased to be able to provide this education and training to Maine Woods Company. They are a leader in one of the industries that has served as the backbone of the County economy for many generations," said NMCC President Timothy Crowley. "NMCC has worked with businesses and organizations throughout northern Maine to meet the continuing education needs of regional employers. As an institution, we will always strive to meet the workforce development needs of the County. This new partnership with Maine Woods Company continues in that tradition."

A key partner in NMCC workforce development efforts over the past decade has been the Maine Quality Centers program, an economic development initiative of the Maine Community College System. The Quality Centers provide job-specific workforce training for new and expanding businesses, and new employment and career advancement opportunities for Maine people. As is the case with Maine Woods Company, customized training is provided at no cost to either the businesses or the trainees.

"We are pleased to assist NMCC in providing this training to an expanding business in Aroostook County. This project is an investment in the continued economic development of both the County's businesses and workforce," said James McGowan, state director of the Maine Quality Centers. The new initiative is the second Maine Quality Centers project developed by NMCC with Maine Woods Inc. The first, in June 2000, trained 66 new employees for the start-up company.

Maine Woods Company LLC was started in 1998 by members of the Pingree Family who desired to manufacture hardwood lumber in northern Maine utilizing the hardwood logs harvested from their lands. In 1999, a state of the art hardwood lumber mill was built and started up in Portage Lake, Maine. The goals of establishing the lumber mill were to vertically integrate it with the Family's 800,000 acre timberland ownerships located in the state as well as to manufacture high quality hardwood lumber.

The complex currently employs 63 workers and produces over 115,000 board feet of hardwood lumber per shift. Approximately 60 percent of the total production is Kiln Dried to customer specifications and further processed as required by the customer. The current annual lumber mill production is 23 million board feet on a single shift basis, positioning the mill in the top 10 hardwood lumber mills in the United States. All lumber is certified sustainable by the Forest Stewardship Council and is growing in demand in North America and abroad.

Approximately the same time the mill was developed, Georgia Pacific acquired leasing rights and built a hardwood chipping facility on the former Great Northern site in Portage Lake. When GP sold their Woodland mill to Domtar and closed their Old Town Mill, the company had no need for the Portage chip plant and closed it. In 2006, the Pingree family acquired the facility and integrated it with Maine Woods Company. The pulp chip market for the plant has been diversified to minimize risk associated with the current pulp and paper markets. A major portion of chips sold from this facility today are to a manufacturer of Rayon fibers for sale to India.

Since the Maine Quality Centers program was established by the Maine Legislature in 1994, 219 expanding Maine businesses have been served, creating 11,713 new jobs statewide. In Aroostook County, since the first joint NMCC/Maine Quality Centers program was initiated in 1997, 23 businesses have benefited from training partnership agreements, totaling an investment of more than \$1.5 million dollars in the region's economy and just over 1,000 new hires.

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