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Troy Wilson, mill manager at Domtar's Kingsport facility, stands inside what will soon be a massive warehouse once a current overhaul of the mill is complete.

PHOTO BY EARL NEIKIRK

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Domtar's Troy Wilson stands inside the uncharacteristically silent mill in Kingsport. The massive machines behind him are currently being adapted to produce recycled containerboard instead of paper.

PHOTO BY EARL NEIKIRK





# A Brave New World

**Domtar's transition from paper to containerboard promises a leaner, greener future in Kingsport**

By Dave Ongie

There's something eerie about the silence that greets you when walk through Domtar's idled production facility in Kingsport. Hulking machines that used to produce paper with an ear-splitting ferocity now sit motionless, their giant rollers gleaming in the dim light.

This silence has permeated the vast majority of Troy Wilson's time as mill manager of Domtar's Kingsport facility. Wilson took over as mill manager in January of 2021 and is presiding over a complete overhaul of the mill, which is being converted from a fine paper producer into Domtar's first packaging facility.

When the \$350 million project is complete, the mill will be able to produce around 600,000 tons of high-quality and medium recycled linerboard, making it the second-largest recycled containerboard producer in North America.

The decision to take the mill offline for an extended period of time required plenty of sacrifices all around. Obviously, Domtar's workforce was impacted significantly as employees had to go out and find other jobs to get them through the extended shutdown.

Meanwhile, Domtar embarked on the herculean task of tearing down existing buildings – some of them over 100 years old – to retool the property for a completely new production process.

But as a new year dawns, there are signs of new life at the plant. Steel beams and girders are rising from the rubble of the original buildings, which now forms the foundation for Domtar's next chapter. By the end of this month, Domtar's entire workforce will be back on the property learning how to make

containerboard.

What will emerge on the other side of the project in the fourth quarter of this year is a leaner, greener production facility that Wilson believes will put Domtar on solid footing for generations to come.

"Domtar has been around for 173 years," Wilson said. "You can't stay in business for 173 years unless you change with the times."

"We're going to move this mill in a different direction to breathe new life into it so it will be here for another 100 years."

## **The Reset Button**

The writing was on the wall for the leadership at Domtar in 2020 as the market for printer paper continued to dwindle while the demand for containerboard kept climbing. The decision to overhaul the Kingsport mill was both daunting and inevitable given the market forces at play.

While the conversion has obviously required a huge financial commitment, Wilson said it also allowed the leadership at the Kingsport mill to hit the reset button in a way most manufacturers never can.

"We didn't have operators trying to run the mill at the same time," Wilson said. "It gives us the opportunity to invest further into the employees and spend the right amount of time with the



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employees and do all the things right in the beginning instead of having to live with some things because we're still running a facility.

"We reset, and we created something that's going to give people a better quality of life."

The downtime has allowed the necessary demolition and construction to take place unabated. The same goes for the massive machines that are being retooled to press and dry containerboard instead of printer paper. Additionally, a new bridge is being constructed over Reedy Creek to create

a new entrance and exit to the facility so trucks won't clog up Kingsport's downtown during the delivery process.

But the changes go beyond the physical transformation of the plant. The efficiency of the new production process also changed the amount of manpower required to run the mill, which allowed Wilson and his team to reevaluate the workflow and redesign a schedule that strived to address the changing workforce needs at the mill and provide a better quality of life for Domtar's employees based in Kingsport.

**A Sigh of Relief**

As demolition wrapped up and construction started this past summer, Wilson found himself wondering what the response would be like when he started calling his workforce back in to prepare for the reopening of the mill.

The headlines he read each day described the struggles of business owners in every sector of the economy to find enough workers to keep their businesses running smoothly, and here he was trying to refill the 150-plus positions required to operate the mill.

Wilson said he breathed a sigh of relief when he started scheduling callback meetings and roughly 94 percent of the employees he called in made the decision to come back to work.

"You can read it in a newspaper, you see it in the news, and we were hoping this is the way it would be," Wilson said. "I think that 94 percent, if you compare that with what's going on in the rest of the world, I think that says something about what we're doing here. People want to work here."

As badly as Wilson needed workers, a main emphasis of the callback meetings was to offer an honest assessment of what the job would entail given the drastic changes to the production process. The new approach is a flow-to-work model with a focus on teams working within a high-performance system.

"I wanted them to understand that," Wilson said. "I gave them all the details around their work schedules, when to report to work, the new equipment and the new design. A lot of those guys have gone out and found jobs or they're doing other things. I want them to make a good decision before we offer them a job to come back."

In the end, Wilson believes a new schedule that offers employees more time away from the mill with their families was a huge draw, as was a new "pay for skills" initiative that rewards employees for upskilling.

**Operation Readiness**

While employees were accepting offers to come back to work during callback meetings, steps were being taken to ensure everyone from the leadership team on down would be ready to run the new mill from Day 1.

The leadership team reported back to the mill on October, followed by team leaders. The group spent October and November

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**Troy Wilson points to some of the rubble from mill buildings that stood on Domtar's property for up to a century. This rubble is now serving as the foundation of Domtar's innovative new mill.**

PHOTO BY EARL NEIKIRK

laying out the new production process and preparing everyone for the return of hourly operators and mechanics. The team leaders were then prepared to pass along their knowledge to the hourly operators and mechanics.

The first wave of employees to come back were the maintenance workers and employees in the power area. They reported on Nov. 29 and brought some life to the quiet mill. They arrived to a quick orientation before delving into a human resources unit, safety training and a leadership component.

The machine crew was scheduled to report on Jan. 4 with the rest of the staff due back by the beginning of February. Again, Wilson said having the mill shut down is crucial in order to spend the necessary time on training in advance of the new operation getting up and running.

Wilson has enjoyed the unique opportunity to get to know everyone in the mill by name. On his desk sits a binder with every employee's photo and picture, which he has been working hard to memorize as waves of personnel return to the mill.

"This whole reset has helped afford me that opportunity," Wilson said.

### School Days

Putting so many people through training would be hard to accomplish inside the mill. Luckily for Wilson, Domtar was able to strike up a partnership with Northeast State Community College that

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\* According to Courthouse Retrieval Systems (CRS). NMLS #34391, TN #109111





**Construction is underway on boilers that will send liquidated recycled cardboard to a series of machines that will transform it into high-quality containerboard.** PHOTOS BY EARL NEIKIRK



**Troy Wilson stands halfway up a hulking machine designed to press the liquid out of the containerboard before sending it on to heated rollers that will dry it out.**

## DOMTAR, CONTIUNED

has allowed Domtar employees to take their training courses in Northeast State's downtown Kingsport location.

"It's a great facility, and it gives us that classroom setting," Wilson said. "It gives us a setting that is conducive to learning. There are no distractions. It's quiet. It has the things that college kids when they go to school."

Between now and May, Domtar employees will continue to get up to speed with the new process and actually learn how to run the new mill in the comfort of a classroom.

## A Greener Future

Once Domtar's Kingsport facility is ready to go back online in the fourth quarter of this year, the mill will be a model of efficiency and innovation that will help put Kingsport on the map. When U.S. Senator Bill Hagarty toured the Domtar's Kingsport facility

in August, he made note of the progress being made.

"They're moving with the market," Hagarty said. "Electronic commerce has really changed the way packaging requirements are being filled here in the United States. Domtar has realized that, and they've taken a major investment to get ahead of the curve."

In the same way Eastman is pioneering a strategy to recycle plastics, Domtar's operation in Kingsport will take discarded cardboard and transform it back into high-quality containerboard. Additionally, plastics and other waste will be diverted to an incinerator that will help create energy to power the facility and the paper-dying process that was necessary in the past will be no more.

"When you look at becoming a 100-percent recycle mill, that's trash or cardboard that was destined for the landfill that we're going to bring here and convert into new boxes again," Wilson said. "And the waste streams that go along with that, we're going to incinerate that and turn that into energy, and we just become greener than we've ever been here with our new product line." <sup>BJ</sup>



**New and old collide as a massive new warehouse takes shape alongside buildings that have stood on the property for decades.**