



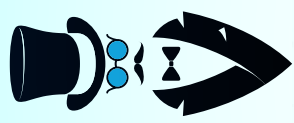
## Dougherty: Rodgers' return far from a given

SPORTS, 1C

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**"If we can't sell the wood, we can't manage the wood. If we can't manage the wood, that has some issues with forest health and ... the overall health of the wood."**

**Rebekah Luedtke**  
Executive director of the Wisconsin County Forests Association

### OUTAGAMIE COUNTY

## Property tax bill includes money for private schools

**AnnMarie Hilton**

Appleton Post-Crescent  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Looking over their property tax bills, Outagamie County residents can clearly see where most of their money is going: a certain percentage for the county, another for the municipality, the school district and some for the local technical college.

But what isn't clear is how much of that money is actually going to private schools. That amount is lumped in with the amount that's listed as going to whichever public school district the resident lives in.

Wisconsin Parental Choice Program — more commonly referred to as "vouchers" — allows students who live outside of Milwaukee and Racine and whose family falls under an income limit to apply for publicly funded vouchers to pay for them to attend private schools. The application requires students to show proof of residency, which is used to determine which taxpayers will be responsible for the cost of the vouchers, according to the state Department of Public Instruction.

Aside from the income requirement, there are certain age requirements for students, depending on when they apply for vouchers. This differs based on whether that student was already attending a private school or if they are looking to get a voucher to move from a public to private school.

For school district leaders in Outagamie County, the issue isn't with families choosing private schools. It's the lack of transparency that can visually inflate the amount of money it appears districts are getting from taxpayers.

"What we struggle with is that it's hidden on the tax bill," said Greg Hartjes, superintendent of the Appleton Area School District.

The district has no control over the amount that ultimately ends up with private schools, Hartjes said. That amount is determined by the state. But on a resident's tax bill, it looks like the money is going to the public schools.

For the 2022-23 school year, vouchers cost about \$8,400 for each student enrolled full time in kindergarten through eighth grade and \$9,045 for ninth through 12th grades, according to the DPI. Those amounts are determined by a formula laid out in state law.

For public districts, there isn't a set statewide per-pupil funding amount, according to DPI. It varies based on a district's revenue limit, which is the total money it is allowed each year through state aid and tax dollars, and average membership — a way of counting students that takes into account if a student is attending full-time or half-day, for example, instead of a straight enrollment count — over the past three years.

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## 'WE HAVE TO WORK EVEN HARDER FOR LESS'

### Loggers still feel ripple effects of idled Wisconsin Rapids mill

**Becky Jacobs**

Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN



At top, A truck driver loads logs onto a truck in October near Minocqua. It's become more expensive to work as a logger due to inflation and rising fuel costs and costly machinery and equipment. In 2020, when Verso idled its mill in Wisconsin Rapids, it created a large void in the state's logging and forest products industries. Above, Wayne Wagler, a third-generation logger, talks during an interview with Henry Schienebeck, right, on Oct. 24, 2022, near Minocqua.

PHOTOS BY TORK MASON/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

HAZELHURST — Logging is all that Wayne Wagler has ever known, and it's the only job he's ever had. He loves spending his days out in the woods, working as his own boss.

A little over a year ago, Wagler, 58, ordered a brand new forwarder — the machine he uses to collect trees he's cut down and move them closer to the road for transport. It's a vital piece of his business, Wagler Forest Products, in the Rhinelander area.

But for one of the first times in his career, "I almost didn't take it," Wagler said.

It's become exponentially more expensive to work as a logger, Wagler said, from inflation and rising fuel costs and costly machinery and equipment. He's not making more money than he did in previous years. And then, in 2020, Verso indefinitely idled its mill in Wisconsin Rapids, creating a large void in Wisconsin's logging and forest products industries virtually overnight.

The Wisconsin Rapids mill took about 25% of the pulpwood in the region, from Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota, according to Henry Schienebeck, executive director of Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association.

"When they shut down, there was kind of this lull where there was wood piled everywhere," Schienebeck said.

Seeing such a huge supply in the market, the rest of the pulp mills in the region started paying much less for the wood that loggers brought them, according to Schienebeck and Wagler.

In the years since, that glut has largely gone away, Schienebeck said. But some loggers have left the industry, either retiring or finding other jobs, such as in construction. The ones who have stayed in business might have to travel further to sell their product. Meanwhile, pulp mills are taking and paying a little bit more for wood now, he said, but not enough to keep up with the costs that loggers face in doing business.

"I mean, we never did make a big profit," said Dennis Schoeneck, who owns and operates Enterprise Forest Products and Forest Products Transit around Rhinelander.

"We were happy to make 2% on a year," he said. "Well, that's kind of a joke now."

So why stay in logging? Schoeneck has asked himself that "many times." Part of it is that at 62 years old, he has invested more than 40 years and a lot of money into his career.

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Legislation renews push for state wealth taxes. **Nation & World, 6A**

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# Loggers

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But it's also that, like Wagler, Schoeneck "absolutely" loves his job.

Sure, there are "a lot of headaches that come with what we do, especially today," he said. But Schoeneck thinks about something that he learned from his father-in-law, who raised Christmas trees: When you walk away from a tree, leave it knowing you've done the best for it that you can.

That's the philosophy Schoeneck's kept while managing timber, and "that's what keeps me doing what I do," he said.

## Loggers 'have to work even harder for less'

On an overcast day in October, Wagler rode in his harvester, moving between the trees on a woodlot in Hazelhurst to select the ones he needed to cut down. Some of the material went through his chipper, while logs were piled up and taken away on trucks.

During his long days out in the woods — which he said typically stretch from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. — Wagler figures out to which markets he'll sell the different types of wood. The trees are used for cardboard boxes, home construction and firewood, among other products.

Wagler and Schoeneck both work with a lot of private landowners in northern Wisconsin, and those private landowners also "took a hit" from what happened in Wisconsin Rapids, Schoeneck said.

For every ton of wood that comes off a private owner's woodlot, Schoeneck said he pays them a certain amount. Before the Verso shutdown, Schoeneck said he felt owners could get "a good, fair price for their wood." But afterward, when mills dropped how much they were paying, Schoeneck said he and other loggers couldn't afford the same stumpage rates anymore, "so the landowner gets less."

Meanwhile, "the cost of machinery has got so out of hand" that Wagler said it makes it difficult for younger people to join the logging industry. Wagler recently teased his banker, he said, by asking, "If I was somebody in my 40s, wanted to come in and borrow a million bucks for a team, what would I need down?" The banker told him he'd need 25 or 30%.

If someone had \$300,000 on hand, "what the hell are you doing buying logging equipment?" Wagler said.

"I used to buy a machine every four to five years," Schoeneck said. "... Now, I put that off."

Schoeneck also never used to be in the trucking business, "but when Rapids shuttered, then several of my truckers left the business," he said. "So, we ended up buying trucks of our own to help haul our wood."

Mills are paying loggers a little more now, but it's not always been enough to keep up with the rise in fuel prices over



A harvester cuts down a tree near Minocqua.

PHOTOS BY TORK MASON/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN



A stack of logs on Oct. 24, 2022, near Minocqua.

the last couple of years, Schoeneck said.

The cost of fuel "is just the straw that broke the camel's back," though, according to Schienebeck. Nothing seems to get cheaper in logging, and even if loggers try to make up some money in production, it's the kind of thing that defeats itself, he said.

Schoeneck explains it this way: If he gets paid the same price today as he did for cutting timber 10 years, but over that decade, the cost of a harvester increased thousands of dollars, the math just doesn't add up.

Loggers have to watch what they do and how they do it "to stay alive," Schoeneck said. And they have to market wood wherever they can, in a market that's getting tighter.

"We always did work hard," Schoeneck said. "Now, we have to work even harder for less."

## Fewer loggers brings concerns about forest health

The future of the Wisconsin Rapids mill, which is now owned by the Swedish company Billerud, remains uncertain. Even if it did start back up today,



Stacks of logs on Oct. 24, 2022, near Minocqua.

though, Schienebeck said he doesn't think they have the logging capacity anymore that it would need.

While he didn't have exact numbers, Schienebeck estimates that there's been a 10% decrease in the logging workforce in the lake states region since that mill idled. The workforce is also getting older, he said; recent studies show the average age is in the mid 50s.

Loggers had already seen dwindling numbers and rising costs in the past, as other pulp and paper mills in the area shut down. The closure of the Wisconsin Rapids mill just exacerbated the problems, Schienebeck said. Supply chain and inflation issues during the COVID-19 pandemic didn't help either, he said.

A 2016 study found that trees generally grew faster in Wisconsin than they could be harvested.

"When Verso closed, that didn't get better," Schoeneck said.

Each year, loggers participate in educational trainings, learning about invasive species, diseases and sustainable practices, among other topics about how to best manage Wisconsin's trees.

"If we can't sell the wood, we can't manage the wood. If we can't manage the wood, that has some issues with forest health and ... the overall health of the wood," said Rebekah Luedtke, executive director of the Wisconsin County Forests Association.

Wisconsin has 30 county forests, and the Wisconsin Rapids mill took about 20% of those county forests' wood, according to Luedtke. The county forests also sent some product to Verso's mill in Duluth, Minnesota, which was idled along with Wisconsin Rapids. (The Duluth Mill has since been sold to ST Paper & Tissue.)

"That's a huge market that we kind of lost overnight," she said.

Overall, Wisconsin's forest products industry provides more than 61,000 direct jobs and has an output of at least \$24.4 billion, according to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Forests provide a source of income for counties in the state, Luedtke said. For instance, Iron County's forest brings in a little over \$2 million to the county's budget each year through the sustainable management and sale of forest products.

Since the Wisconsin Rapids mill idled, Wisconsin's county forests have had to be more flexible and look for other niche markets to sell to, Luedtke said, such as firewood. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increased demand for dimensional lumber and plywood, she said, and the need for telephone poles has remained strong.

Still, Luedtke said she thinks it will still be several years before we see the full effects of the Wisconsin Rapids mill shutting down.

"All we all we can do is ... try to work with our contractors and try to work with our buyers on different avenues and just try to manage it the best we can," she said.

Reach Becky Jacobs at [bjacobs@gannett.com](mailto:bjacobs@gannett.com) or 920-993-7117. Follow her on Twitter at [@ruthyjacobs](https://twitter.com/ruthyjacobs).



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