

Crown Maple Expands to Mountainside in Vermont

New York-based company launches big install project in Vermont

By Peter Gregg | November 2015



SANDGATE, VT — The big keep getting bigger.

New York's Crown Maple, already one of the top 20 biggest sugaring operations in the United States with more than 50,000 taps, has launched a major expansion plan in a neighboring state, aggressively tapping the back side of Mt. Equinox in Sandgate, Vt. with hopes to eventually add 150,000 taps there.

"Robb just loves the industry and the idea of getting something from your forest without timbering," said Tyge Rugenstein, the chief operating officer for Crown Maple, speaking about the company owner Robb Turner, who runs a \$13 billion Boston hedge fund.

Turner and his company bought 4,400 acres in Sandgate earlier this year, saying they had run out of expansion opportunities near their main facility in Dover Plains, N.Y. about an hour north of New York City.

The sale became the talk of the local maple community in Southern Vermont and Eastern New York, especially when the company quickly put out bids calling to have 75,000 taps installed on the 3,800 ft. mountain by Dec. 1.

The winning bids came from Mike Bennett of Bennett's Maple for the install job and CDL USA for all of the equipment and materials. CDL also has the supply contract on another massive install job in Island Pond, Vt.

"75,000 taps. We know that's an aggressive goal," Rugenstein said during a tour of the operation in Sandgate for The Maple News on Oct. 23.

Rugenstein, a West Point grad and a longtime Army officer used to overseeing large logistical projects, said he and Turner have a lot of confidence in Bennett, who helped set up the company's home sugarbush in Dover Plains five years ago.

Bennett has earned a reputation in the industry as a first-rate install man and has helped many operations with their successful expansion projects.

Working seven days per week with a 20-person crew recruited from as far away as Maine, Bennett has already gotten 10 miles of 3 and 4-inch mainline fusion pipe installed and a good portion of the most rugged upper regions of the mountain are already tapped.

Four thousand feet of 1 inch pipe and 2000 rolls of 5/16 lateral lines have been installed.

"We're pulling in guys from all over. We have a powerhouse team," Bennett said on Oct. 23. "The hardest part is already done."

The crew was fortunate in that most of the mountain was already carved with roads and ATV trails, so access has not been a problem, Bennett said.

The property sits in a natural bowl, making it almost perfect for sap to be run all directly to one location for processing. The size of the project is staggering. The farthest tap away from the R/O center on the property is three and half miles.

"This project is so big we have three different exposures which means we are going to have three different seasons here," Bennett said.

Overseeing much of the design work of the install project is CDL's Carl Plante, who also served as project manager for the massive Sweet Tree LLC project in Island Pond, which expects to have 300,000 taps installed by the upcoming season.

Crown plans to concentrate all of their sap on site in Sandgate to 20 percent and then truck the concentrate in bulk milk haulers three hours to Crown's main facility in Dover Plains to boil. It's about a 100 mile trip.

Rugenstein did not seem worried that the sap would turn during the long ride, since it will be hauled in tankers designed to haul milk, as much a perishable as sap.

"We know it's not done very often concentrating sap and trucking it that far," Rugenstein said. "But we want to maximize our facility that is already down there where we already have the capacity."

Crown's main facility in Dover Plains is a vast open brick-and-mortar building already equipped with a Leader 6 x16 and a recently added a 6x18 CDL Master evaporator.

Labeling laws mandate that syrup be labeled from the state where it is boiled, not where the sap is collected. So Crown's syrup originating from the Vermont taps will be labeled as "New York."

The company has major retail accounts across the country including Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and 440 Krogers grocery stores on the West Coast.

Rugenstein said that Crown Maple hopes to become the leading retail brand in pure maple, as identifiable to the consumer as Aunt Jemima or Mrs. Butterworths.

Meanwhile, back in Sandgate, the crew is in a race against the clock to get as much tapped and equipment installed in time for the season.

Plante said that CDL is setting up ten 24ft. holding tanks, each able to hold 7,500 gallons. CDL has also custom manufactured R/O units that are skinnier than normal and able to fit comfortably in the back of tractor trailer containers which will be parked in a clearing at the bottom of the mountain. Also coming will be two 350kw generators for power.

Rugenstein, Bennett and Plante all seemed confident that they will get close to getting their 75,000 taps in before the first sap run and ultimately there are enough trees to double that number in a year or two.

"These trees are in very good health," Bennett said.

"It's a moving target on how much we can get installed here," Rugenstein said. "But we see maybe 150,000 taps.