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## Working both sides of the Rockies

Oler Bros Contracting takes a unique approach to where it operates, in that it works on both sides of the Rocky Mountains and has clients in both Alberta and British Columbia. The company recently took on some new partners: Strandquist Bros Contracting.

By Tony Kryzanowski



*For processing logs, Ken Oler likes the performance of John Deere's 2054 carrier with a Waratah 622B head.*

Downsizing and consolidation is not just occurring among forestry companies. Some logging contractors are also pooling resources to remain viable—and to take advantage of the logging know-how that is now available due to sawmill curtailments and shutdowns. That's one reason why long time Alberta logger Ken Oler thought the timing was right to take on some experienced partners.

While the softwood lumber market is very challenging at present, many Alberta forest companies are being required to draft mountain pine beetle management plans. This has often meant that they will be harvesting more wood over the short term to counteract the beetle's march eastward. So this situation is creating some new logging opportunities.

Oler Bros Contracting Ltd, based in Sundre, Alberta, has gone into partnership with Strandquist Bros Contracting Ltd, which found itself a casualty of the recent industry downturn. Oler has joined forces with Kent and

Glenn Strandquist, which has resulted in a fleet consolidation and a formal partnership between two logging organizations that have worked side by side for a couple of decades.

“One of our main reasons for this partnership was to create a situation where we can be efficient, viable and weather the storm,” says Oler, who also has three sons, Sam, William and James working with him. “It's grouping together people with many years of logging experience who know what customers want in terms of a high quality job.”

Kent Strandquist says being laid off wasn't a huge surprise given market conditions, but it was a big relief for the company when they were able to create a partnership with Oler Bros Contracting.

Strandquist Bros Contracting had been a primary contractor for Atlas Lumber in Crowsnest Pass, Alberta, harvesting about 120,000 cubic metres per year, primarily in the Rocky Mountain foothills. But the owners of Atlas Lumber shut the doors and its forest assets were purchased by Spray Lakes Sawmills in Cochrane. However, Spray Lakes Sawmills is facing the same tough markets as the other forest companies, and Strandquist Bros Contracting was one of the two primary logging contractors the company had to lay off. This left the owners with a fleet of equipment and no work—until the partnership with Oler Bros Contracting came along.



*Oler Bros Contracting does most of its logging on steep ground, which can reach up to a 50 per cent slope, and all of its feller bunchers are tilters. This includes two Timbco 445 EX feller bunchers with Quadco QFH22 heads capable of 360 degree rotation.*

There are potentially new logging opportunities on the horizon. West Fraser Timber, one of Oler's priority clients, has just received provincial approval for its mountain pine beetle initiative, which increases the company's annual allowable cut for its Sundre Forest Products operations from 800,000 cubic metres to 1.3 million cubic metres.

"It will probably increase the amount of available work because everyone is trying to stay ahead of the pine beetle," says Oler. "They (West Fraser) feel the best approach is to be ahead of it rather than to be reactive after the fact." Oler's new partners have decades of experience harvesting timber in the extremely hilly terrain of the Southern Alberta foothills, which is one area of the province where the beetle is most evident.

There are several unique aspects to the Oler Bros Contracting operation. Ken Oler has shown himself to be a master of not putting all his eggs in one basket, although he works exclusively for forestry companies. He says he prefers to concentrate on the company's bread and butter by offering a variety of services to his forestry clients, which includes log harvesting, log hauling, and road building.

The first rather unique aspect to the business is that Oler Bros Contracting harvests wood on both sides of the Rocky Mountains and has clients in both Alberta and British Columbia. "The reason we have pursued work on both sides of the rock is simply because summertime logging in Alberta can be very hit-and-miss," says Oler.

In total, the company's annual cut is about 370,000 cubic metres, with about 70 per cent of that total coming from its contract with Sundre Forest Products and 30 per cent coming from Canfor's operations in Radium, BC. Oler says there is no doubt that working for two of Canada's largest forest companies has its advantages, providing some measure of stability.



*Alberta's Oler Bros Contracting has bulked up on experience by partnering with Strandquist Bros Contracting. The partners in the new venture are (left to right) Kent Strandquist, Glenn Strandquist, and Ken Oler.*

softwood lumber markets.

Another positive aspect to his situation is that West Fraser operates a variety of forest product manufacturing facilities through its Sundre operations, including a sawmill, laminated veneer lumber (LVL) plant and wood treatment plant. So his logging operations are not entirely dependent on the ebb and flow of

Working in both provinces also helps to keep cash flow steady and employees working consistently, especially through the summer months when weather can be unpredictable. "It has worked out quite well because we have been able to move equipment, people, and trucks back and forth to keep our workers and equipment busy," Oler says.

"During the past three summers in BC, we've had about 99 per cent uptime."

Another advantage to working in BC in summer is the soil drainage issue. "The soils are a lot more forgiving in terms of wet weather in BC," he says. "There is a lot more rock component in the soils and the logging systems are different. They do a lot of skidding to main trails and landings, so site degradation is less of an issue."

Conversely, when summer logging in BC was scaled back a few years ago because of the extreme fire hazard, Oler was able to move his workers and equipment back to Alberta where logging conditions were ideal.

Soil conditions are not the only thing that is different. Oler Bros Contracting must contend with a lot more infected beetle wood on the BC side, although the infestation in south central BC is nowhere near as bad as in the Prince George and Quesnel areas.

The company harvests wood anywhere from Cranbrook to Golden, with the log diet consisting of about 30 per cent Douglas fir, 60 per cent lodgepole pine and 10 per cent spruce. Tree size averages 2.5 to three trees per metre. Because the beetle has already infected a significant amount of the BC pine forest, there is tremendous pressure to harvest infected areas first—forest companies only have about two years after infestation before they start to notice a significant drop in lumber quality.

On the Alberta side, the harvest for Oler Bros Contracting is about four trees per cubic metre, as they tend to be harvesting trees on steeper ground.

The company does most of its logging on steep ground, which can reach up to a 50 per cent slope. This is the main contributing factor to another rather unique aspect to the business. All of its feller bunchers are tilters. This includes two Timbco 445 EX feller bunchers with Quadco QFH22 heads capable of 360 degree rotation, a Valmet 445 EX feller buncher with a Gilbert 2022 head, also with 360 degree rotation capability, and a Caterpillar 723B feller buncher. Overall, time will tell how well the merger pans out, says Oler, but given his good relations with Strandquist Bros Contracting in the past and the experience Kent and Glenn bring to the company, he feels very positive about the future.



