Rolling with the changes

Logger Clint Lightburn is rolling with the changes as forest company Canfor is asking its contractors in southeastern B.C. to move from delivering tree length wood to cut-to-length to its upgraded mill facility at Elko.

By Tony Kryzanowski

The Lightburn Family has been part of the southeastern British Columbia logging community for over 30 years. Clint Lightburn is pleased that with the purchase of Tembec’s sawmills in that part of the province by Canfor, he has been able to continue the family tradition during this time of transition.

He owns Lightburn Ventures—which is based in the small town of Jaffray, about 50 kilometres east of Cranbrook—with his wife, Michelle.

The business has grown significantly since Lightburn bought his dad out in 1999. At that time, the logging company operated with just one crew and about six regular employees. Now the company operates three crews with 15 regular employees. Lightburn says he has seen a definite trend towards forest companies wanting to work with larger contractors, particularly when Tembec arrived in the area and purchased Crestbrook Forest Industries in 2000, and even more so with the purchase of Tembec’s sawmill assets by Canfor.

He views the expansion of Canfor’s operations in the Kootenay Valley as positive and a stabilizing force in an area that has seen its share of temporary shutdowns because of poor lumber prices.

“They (Canfor) have brought some stability back into the area because in 2009 when the lumber market crashed, we were shut down for six months when the Elko sawmill was shut down,” says Lightburn.

Prior to the Tembec sawmill purchase, Canfor already had a presence in the Valley with a sawmill in Radium about an hour-and-a-half north of Cranbrook. But that mill also fell victim to low lumber prices and was mothballed for about three years. However, it has since re-opened and Canfor has spent $38.5 million to update both the sawmill and planer mill. After announcing the reopening of the Radium sawmill, the company continued to invest and purchased Tembec’s sawmills in both Elko and Canal Flats.

As local sawmills changed hands over the years, Lightburn Ventures has shown a willingness to adapt to mill requirements. For example, among the changes Canfor’s loggers in southeastern B.C. have been asked to make is to shift from harvesting and delivering long logs to cut-to-length, or ‘short’ logs by this spring. They will continue to be sorted by both species and diameter.

Lightburn Ventures harvests 250,000 cubic metres for Canfor as a stump-to-roadside contractor, working in a steep slope environment within about an hour and-a-half radius from Cranbrook. The logs are shipped to the Elko sawmill.
The logging environment is bookended by the Rocky Mountains to the east and the Purcell Mountains to the west. While it is one of Canada’s most picturesque areas, it takes a particular skill set and years of experience to work safely on these slopes. Given the terrain, loggers must deck logs at both roadside and on landings. Lightburn began working with his father in the business at 18 years old and has over 20 years experience.

The timber diet is predominantly lodgepole pine. However, they will also harvest Douglas fir, larch, balsam fir, and spruce. Average diameter is 6” to 10”. Lightburn Ventures has been dealing with small patches of mountain pine beetle infestations for years, but unlike the B.C. Interior, the variety of wood species within area forests has helped to keep the beetle in check.

“Our trenches are loaded with Douglas fir, which doesn’t affect us with the pine beetle,” says Lightburn. “It’s only when you get into higher elevations that you get into stands of pine. We are very fortunate to have the mixed species.” What has influenced the species mix more than anything else over the years have been fires; major fires devastated the local forest in the 1930s, and smaller fires have occurred more recently.

When Canfor announced that it was making the transition to short logs, Lightburn was able to offer the company experience with this style of logging.

“We did cut short logs for two full seasons, so I have some experience with this style of logging,” says Lightburn. He understands that he can expect a definite change in production with the extra time it takes to process short logs. With Canfor’s new short log system, the number of sorts will also increase from four to as many as twelve.

“When you go from processing tree length wood to processing short wood, you lose about 30 per cent production from a processor,” he says. “So, while I am running three processors to achieve my production on long logs, I’m going to have to run a fourth processor to make up what you lose in production by cutting short logs.”

It will also require an adjustment to coordinate log hauls. With limited space available on landings, sorting logs both by size and species can be a challenge, especially with extra sorts.

“When we are working on landings and we don’t have much room, we have to have more trucks available and keep fewer logs on deck than if we deck at roadside,” Lightburn says. “You might only have two days of hauling on deck on a landing instead of four or five days of hauling at roadside.”

While the logging environment is challenging and does take careful planning and co-ordination, Lightburn Ventures has the benefit of being able to work for nearly the entire year. Unlike other areas of Canada where loggers are often shut down for about three months for spring breakup and the bird nesting season, Lightburn says they shut down for only a month, usually in April.

Because of the amount of snow the area can receive, they make adjustments where they log depending on the time of year. He described the terrain as a ‘mixed bag’ ranging from zero to 60 per cent slope.

“Our winters aren’t too bad but the high country can have up to seven feet of snow,” says Lightburn. “Our logging strategies change somewhat. We try to work the steeper areas in summer and fall.”
Given the work environment and the amount of snow the area can accumulate, Lightburn Ventures has added Caterpillar 527 tracked skidders to their fleet to retrieve logs in areas where rubber tired skidders can’t handle the combination of slope and snow depth. The tracked skidders can retrieve logs in terrain up to 50 per cent slope.

Lightburn Ventures has made significant investments in its fleet over the past couple of years, and Lightburn feels that it is a good time to purchase equipment; loggers are being offered fair trade-in value on their old equipment, he says. They plan to replace a log loader and with the shift to short wood, and they may have to purchase another processor.

The company has chosen specific equipment brands for each step in the falling, processing, and loading functions based on both past performance in this environment and service support. On the harvesting end, they operate two Tigercat tilting LX830 feller bunchers with Tigercat 22” hotsaws.

“We feel that the Tigercat feller bunchers are the ticket for this forest environment,” says Lightburn. “They handle the steep slopes, they handle the snow, and they are a fairly productive, low cost machine.”

Working to retrieve the logs are three Cat 527 tracked skidders, two John Deere 848H grapple skidders, and two John Deere 748G-III grapple skidders. Regarding the selection of John Deere rubber-tired skidders, Lightburn says they have provided him with good performance and the service has been good when he needs it.

On the processing end, Lightburn Ventures has three Tigercat 855C carriers equipped with Waratah 622B processing heads. The company has chosen a smaller processing head because most of their wood is in the 6” to 10” range, and with a smaller head, production is a bit faster. Lightburn says that speed is crucial when processing smaller stems.

“I chose the Tigercat carriers because they are just a little more productive and they have a great cooling package,” he says. “They never overheat and you don’t have the same issues as you do with a generic excavator processor. We’ve also gotten excellent support from Kenworth, which is the Tigercat dealer in Cranbrook.”

To load logs, they use a John Deere 2454 log loader and a John Deere 2154 log loader. Rounding out the fleet is a John Deere 2154 excavator for road building.

While overall equipment performance is important, Lightburn’s primary concern is service support followed closely by fuel consumption, when looking to replace a piece of equipment.

“When I took over from my dad in 1999, our fuel prices were 48 cents a litre and now we are well over a dollar,” he says.

With Canfor focusing on wood recovery and capturing as much value from each stem as possible, the company will undoubtedly be depending a great deal on its logging contractors—such as Lightburn Ventures—to partner with it to ensure that there is good coordination between what contractors are producing in the forest and the specific needs of its completely modernized sawmills in both Radium and Elko.