Embracing New Technology

St. Onge Logging, Kalispell, Montana

By Barbara Coyner

For years, St. Onge Logging relied on slide booms as a key component in the company’s equipment stable, as it logged long-term for Plum Creek. But then the Kalispell, Montana-based outfit got a look at some of the emerging dangle head technology, and Kevin St. Onge began to change his mind about his future equipment choices.

As the new Waratah 622B processor head debuted in the Pacific Northwest, St. Onge gave the prototype—serial number 3—a serious workout and was happy he signed on the dotted line in 2004.

Today, the company owns a 622B, along with the recently-purchased Waratah 622C. Kevin figures his company and a couple of Canadian outfits put the first 622Bs to work in the region, and now with its established track record, St. Onge is still clearly impressed with the flexible head design.

Deere and Waratah Combo

“We stuck with the slide booms for a time—the mono boom and the telescopic boom—rather than the dangle head, because measurements weren’t quite as accurate in those earlier heads,” Kevin explains, noting that he had tracked various equipment stats all along. “Other contractors were beginning to use dangle heads at that point. Ed McDaid, general manager with Waratah, knew we were looking to upgrade, so he encouraged us to look at a 622. I liked the way the head appeared tougher and more heavy-duty. Ed felt the 622B would be right for the size of timber we were working with.”

Because St. Onge Logging was still fine-tuning its equipment lineup, the new head got an audition on a John Deere 2054. In 2012, when Kevin and his brother Bob bought a new 622B head on a John Deere 2154D, they thought they’d really found the dream team. By the time the new Waratah 622C came on board, the match with the Deere machine was solidified and became their hands-down favorite way to harvest timber.

“The John Deere 2154D really woke that head up, as well as improvements Waratah was implementing to the 622B,” Kevin says. “We were given an opportunity to try a Waratah 622C, but the manufacturer was still in a testing phase.” With that trial, St. Onge was already sold on the 622C and would have bought it on the spot, no further testing required. It was the team of the Waratah head and the John Deere 2154D that had him convinced. “The John Deere just seemed purpose-built for that head. There’s better cooling because of the auxiliary oil cooler, plus it has 25 more horsepower for added power. We now have no issues with overheating.”

How important is the overheating issue? St. Onge says before the current equipment configuration, the crews could work steadily on hot days only until about 11:00 a.m., when they would have to shut down to deal with overheating. Such overheating could often cut into production in summer, but the now the crews can run all day.

Good Stands

As St. Onge satisfies Weyerhaeuser mills at Columbia Falls and Evergreen (previously owned by Plum Creek), and also pays two five-man crews based on production, the lack of interruption is a huge part of running a successful business model.
Cutting a lot of pine, Douglas fir, and larch, St. Onge feels lucky to be working steadily for Weyerhaeuser. The timber giant puts out a whole list of value-added products and serves a variety of niche markets, meaning the company isn’t solely dependent on the fits and starts of the housing market.

Working much of the time in even-sized stands of timber, the Waratah easily buzzes through multiple stems, plus the machine can cut a big wad of pulp in one pass. Despite the rigorous workout, the head requires little tinkering. An auto stem alignment system with its four rollers is part of the appeal and efficiency.

“We need to put on new knives annually,” Kevin says of the company’s routine maintenance, noting that he always hopes the knives can make a full season. “You just have to keep the head greased, watch for cracks, and keep the knives sharp. They’re gusseted in the right spots,” he adds, clearly impressed with the manufacturer’s attention to detail on the gussets.

“We do most of the repairs ourselves, but when things are more complex, Wayne Davidson [Waratah dealer rep] can troubleshoot by phone,” Kevin adds. “Wayne has a quick mind and can figure out a lot of things with just a phone call. You’ve got to have that service. When we got the heads, it was all Greek, but then you figure things out and get a good grasp of what needs to be done.”

Growing a Company

Figuring things out and getting a good grasp of what needs to be done—those are the hallmarks for any logging company. Bob and Kevin got their training early, working with their dad in the woods. “Dad started on his own with a dozer in 1971,” Kevin recalls. “He grew when there was an opportunity to grow, and logging gave his three sons something to do in the summer.”

Eventually, Bob joined the Air Force, getting out in 1984, and Kevin finished a business degree from the University of Montana in 1987. By 1994, the time was right for the two brothers to take over the business, although things didn’t exactly look promising with the spotted owl issues swirling around the Pacific Northwest. The full impact of those tumultuous times never hit the St. Onge operation as hard, however, because Plum Creek had a lot of its own land, and it had barely been touched.

These days, both Bob and Kevin keep a steady eye on production. Each man runs a crew and shares in equipment purchases, not to mention dealing with day-to-day maintenance and repair situations, as well as personnel issues.

The company prefers to buy all new equipment to avoid down time. Currently, the equipment stable includes a John Deere 748h grapple skidder, two 648 grapple skidders, and of course the 2154 machines. There is also a TimberPro 735 feller buncher, a Timbco 445EXL, and two D6C Cat dozers. St. Onge also has two John Deere 2054 log loaders to handle the loading and sorting chores.

Reliable Crew

As for the crewmembers, Kevin says it’s been nice to have a long-term reliable crew, and one crewmember has been with the company for over 20 years. Given the company policy of paying per hour with per load incentives, the ticket is finding self-motivated employees.
Weyerhaeuser also likes to work with accredited loggers, meaning that refresher courses in forest practices help keep production humming, because trained loggers can often work independently without calling on the Weyerhaeuser foresters. Kevin says his business degree also helps with company finances and business decisions.

With the Forest Service still on tight rations for logging activities, Kevin feels the federal lands need further cutting for fire safety and forest health. This is especially true when federal lands are adjacent to private or state lands, thus increasing fire danger to all the forest. Yet a shift to more federal sales would perhaps mean a change in equipment for many logging contractors.

“Right now, the timber is getting smaller,” Kevin assesses. “The processor head fits that type of wood, but it can also handle bigger trees. If there is a change in the wood, the machines can still handle it well.”