Switching Gears — to Cut-to-Length

Ontario logger Louie Ricci is dealing with changes in the industry by switching some logging gear in his business, making the move to cut-to-length processing and purchasing additional wood chippers.

By Tony Kryzanowski

Raleigh Falls Timber has a fleet of seven feller bunchers in its operations, consisting of older Timberjacks, as well as John Deere model 850s. The company’s newest unit is a John Deere e853J feller buncher with a GN Royhead.

When change occurs in the forest industry, Ontario logger Louie Ricci believes a logger basically has two choices. They can do nothing and get left behind—or change with the times, do their best and hope for the best. He has chosen the latter route.

“I had to change with the times or else I would have pretty well been out of business,” says Ricci. “We had to be flexible. Hopefully the situation will stay in the same direction for a little while now, so that we can catch up again.”

When area mills stopped purchasing tree-length wood, the company made the switch to cut-to-length (CTL) processing at roadside and purchased more chippers. It also converted equipment suited for tree-length operations to construction equipment, such as putting them to work as backhoes.
Based in Ignace, Ontario, Ricci’s company—Raleigh FallsTimber—is a major softwood chip supplier to the Domtar papermill in Dryden and also provides logs to the Domtar sawmill in Ear Falls. Within the past year, the company has doubled its Peterson Pacific DDC 5000 portable chipper fleet from two to four and sidelined most of its stroke delimiters, replacing them with processors. Sawlogs destined for Ear Falls range from five inches to 18 inches in diameter in eight-foot lengths.

Despite the avalanche of reports of mill closures and production curtailments in northwestern Ontario, Ricci says his company is holding its own. But it is having to endure the challenges of managing the expense of changing forestry operations to match demand.

After starting out as a log haul contractor with one truck, Ricci decided to make the transition to logging contractor when companies in northwestern Ontario began hiring private contractors to handle logging operations rather than doing it themselves. He entered into a partnership to operate Raleigh Falls Timber and then became the sole owner. Ricci Trucking continues to operate as the log and chip haul contractor for logging and chipping operations, operating 25 trucks of its own and supplementing its fleet with subcontractors. At full capacity, Raleigh Falls Timber has 200 employees and is one of the largest logging contractors in the area.

At present, the company harvests about 750,000 cubic metres of primarily softwood, with a small amount of poplar and birch from the Wabigon Forest area in the vicinity of Ignace and Dryden. That amount has remained quite consistent, although now about 600,000 cubic metres is chipped, explaining the company’s recent doubling of its chipper fleet. Ricci says it is a tidier way to log because very little slash is left in the forest and there are no brush piles because the smaller diameter timber is chipped.

“That’s the advantage of operating your own chippers,” says Ricci, “you utilize the whole forest.”

The equipment fleet at Raleigh Falls Timber has grown fairly consistently. After starting with one chipper and three feller bunchers, the company is now up to four chippers and seven feller bunchers. Four feller bunchers are older Timberjack 608s and two are John Deere 850 feller bunchers, all equipped with Gilbert heads. Four have an 18-inch capacity and two have a 22-inch capacity, reflecting the size of wood in the area. Most recently, the company purchased a new John Deere 853J feller buncher. A number of improvements have been made to both the power output and boom durability on this new model. For example, the peak horsepower has been increased by 15 percent from 255 horsepower to 294 horsepower at 1,900 rpm. Ricci says he is pleased with the design changes on the boom because the company was having issues with boom cracks on other models. The 853J features a larger boom cross-section, delivering greater strength. It also has improved weld connections.

There have also been improvements in productivity as the saw pump size has been increased from 40 cc to 60 cc, delivering up to 50 per cent more power for saw speed recovery. The attachment pump capacity has also been increased from 63 cc to 71 cc.

As a result of customer feedback, Sure-Grip handles are now standard equipment in the cab. Ricci adds that the electronic controls also allow each operator to customize the control settings so that they are comfortable with how quickly the feller buncher and head react. The feller buncher itself weighs in at 58,810 pounds. Cutting reach with John Deere’s standard FS22 attachment is 27 feet, six inches. It has a 6.9 rpm swing speed and its fuel capacity is 295 US gallons (1,117 litres). Ricci reports the new feller buncher has operated virtually trouble-free.
During the transition to cut-to-length processing and chipping, Raleigh Falls Timber put several of its surplus carriers to work in roadbuilding.

Raleigh Falls Timber has equipped its 853J buncher with a GN Roy 2456B head. GN Roy is headquartered in Amos, Quebec, and this feller buncher head is the bigger of two models produced by the company, weighing in at 6,400 pounds. It has a cutting capacity of 24 inches and an accumulating capacity of 5.06 square feet. The head has a 160 cc Rexroth variable range saw motor, and seals are made of polymyte, which is highly resistant to heat and cold. This ranges from minus 65 degrees F to 275 degrees F. It can also withstand high pressure, as high as 7,000 psi. GN Roy points out that the planetary gear is built with a holding bearing, which is completely separate from the planetary and supports the head’s weight.

“The operators tell me that they really like the head because the visibility is good and it accumulates really well,” says Ricci. The GN Roy head installed on Ricci’s John Deere 853J feller buncher can rotate 280 degrees, which came in particularly handy in the last year as the company was harvesting a considerable amount of blow-down wood.

Ricci says having dealer support has proven invaluable, especially with the difficult terrain where the company is harvesting wood these days. Forestry companies typically chase the inexpensive, lower hanging fruit in the early stages of managing their forest holdings. However, logs located in more challenging areas must be harvested eventually. That is the situation now with Domtar in that particular area of Ontario. Raleigh Falls Timber finds itself working in areas with a lot of Canadian Shield rock, cliffs, and steep slopes. That type of terrain is particularly hard on undercarriages and tires and represents some of the most challenging conditions for road building in Canada.

The company’s road building fleet consists of a Caterpillar D7 dozer, two John Deere 2554 excavators, a John Deere 230 excavator, a Komatsu 300 excavator, a Kobelco 300 excavator and a Hitachi 250 excavator.
Ricci says the company tends to hold on to its equipment for as long as is economically feasible and operates well equipped service shops in both Ignace and Dryden. With that philosophy in mind, it helps to maintain brand consistency because mechanics become very familiar with the equipment and parts replacement.

The company trades in its feller bunchers and skidders every four to five years to maximize uptime on what Ricci calls his “line of fire” units. Raleigh Falls Timber owns eight John Deere 748 GII skidders to transport wood to roadside, and processes the wood using Votec Hornet processing heads mounted on three Hitachi carriers.

“I watched the Hornets operate at a forestry show in Kelowna in 2001 and they seemed to operate pretty well,” says Ricci. “They’re accurate because they have a butt plate on them, so you always get the right dimensions.” His oldest Hornet processor has 17,000 hours on it. Logs are loaded using a John Deere loader equipped with a Superior, one cord clam attachment.

While the proposal to build a $60 million birch laminated veneer lumber (LVL) mill in Atikokan, southeast of Dryden, would most likely benefit the logging community primarily in that area, Ricci says it would probably also benefit the region as a whole because it would create a new market for birch. At present, there is little demand for hardwood and Raleigh Falls Timber actually tries to avoid areas where pockets of birch are growing. So, should a market develop for birch veneer logs, there may be demand for birch even as far as Dryden.

The company proposing the LVL mill, FibraTech Manufacturing, is planning to use new technology that would allow it to accept veneer logs only seven inches in diameter on average.

In terms of the overall future of the local forest sector, Ricci believes that as long as everyone works to keep their costs down and pulls together, the sector should survive these challenging times. However, there have been a few casualties among smaller operators who simply cannot justify continuing to stay in business, and Ricci is noticing that it is becoming harder to find log haul contractors.