

## A Modest Beginning

**Darrell and Robert Ophus started out modestly in logging equipment with a single skidder, but the brothers now have 19 pieces of equipment to harvest 280,000 cubic metres of mostly beetle wood for forest company Canfor in the B.C. Interior.**

*By Jim Stirling*

Pushing the rump of the winter logging season in the Central Interior of British Columbia is frequently a necessity, but always a risky day-to-day venture for logging contractors and truckers. Most often the capricious pre-spring weather deals a joker and frustrates logging plans.

But sometimes the weather gods smile. The side roads remain frozen. New snow is light or non-existent. Temperatures remain a few degrees below zero, good for machines and production. Logging trucks can get in and back out safely and the mill receives the log volumes it requires, when it requires them.

Such was the brief but welcome scenario for Sob Lake Contracting and its crews deep into March of 2014. The off-highway loads of cut-to-length sorts they produced were bound for Canfor's Isle Pierre sawmill west of Prince George on the Nechako River, where most of the volume was scheduled for hot loading into the mill.

Sob Lake Contracting runs mainly Caterpillar equipment and operates off the Bobtail Forest Service Road and its feeders to the southwest of the Isle Pierre mill. It's home turf and very familiar territory for brothers Darrell and Robert Ophus who run Sob Lake Contracting. They grew up in the area and run cattle raising operations there.

"That's one of the reasons why we were interested in this licence when it became available," recalled Robert Ophus. That was about nine years ago. "It's worked out very well for us over the years. There's a Finning field mechanic based in (nearby) Vanderhoof and the Cat service for us has been unbelievable. We can simply get a replacement machine if something goes down," he said. "Canfor has been good keeping us in wood and help us plan ahead with our logging phases."

Sob Lake has a 280,000 cubic metre annual allowable cut with Canfor and operates about 19 pieces of major equipment to produce it.

That's quite the measure of progress since 1985, when Robert Ophus bought a Clark 666 skidder. (The machine's still around, doing service as a water truck.) He went logging with the Clark, primarily in private wood. Around 1988, the Ophus brothers acquired a Cat 215 with a Steyr processing head. (The 215 is still contributing, too, working around the farm equipped with a bucket: "Just hit the key and it keeps on running")

When the 20-something brothers went shopping for their processor, they were fortunate to have an astute local banker; he listened to the Ophus' business plan, recognized it had merit and they were in business.

"We just gradually grew from there." They worked on private wood, acquired cuts and bought timber sale licences in their preferred operating area, a practice Sob Lake continues.



The region has been hit hard by the mountain pine beetle epidemic and Robert reckons 90 per cent of their present cut is in beetle killed wood. It's characteristically small volume, with average piece sizes around .25 cubic metres. It's the type of logging that requires more machines to produce the volumes required to compensate for the small piece sizes.

Three Tigercat 870 feller bunchers are responsible for the falling phases along with a John Deere 903J. The 870s have 22 inch heads with full rotation wrists. Despite the predominantly small wood sizes, Robert said the larger 870s are used because they work well within themselves, last longer and command a better re-sale price. Sob Lake operates two Cat 535 skidders and a 545 and six Cat 320B processors with Waratah 622B heads. There's also a Hitachi 200 butt n' top.

On the bulldozer side, Sob Lake runs a Cat D7R, a D8 and a D6D. The company operates one dedicated logging truck and another that's predominantly used as a low bed. Moving equipment around is a constant, often to access small patches. Part of that is reflected by the approximately 70 kilometres of block roads Sob Lake builds each year

"We go with new harvesting equipment rather than used," confirmed Robert. "New equipment has worked really well for us. It keeps downtime minimal and you know your costs. Nowadays, operators want newer equipment," he added.

The bulldozers are the exception to the "buy new" credo. "You can still get parts for old Cats like the D8," he noted, and their re-sale value is more steady than high. Sob Lake enjoys very little turnover within its operator ranks. Each operator has his own main piece of equipment to run and be responsible for day-to-day maintenance like greasing. But there's a built-in versatility by design. "All our crew can pretty much run anything."

As a rule, Sob Lake doesn't double-shift its logging equipment and maintains a full time mechanic. There's a strong family involvement in the company's operation, including the brothers' wives. Robert's wife, Vicki, is Sob Lake Contracting's secretary and manages the payroll while Roseanne, Darrell's wife, is safety co-ordinator. Sob Lake is a certified SAFE company, under the BC Forest Safety Council. Both the partners have sons working with the company.

An interesting feature at Sob Lake's cut-to-length operation is the layering of the main wood sorts, with 12-foot material on the bottom, then the 24-foot and two sorts of 36-foot lengths. The decks are built slightly back from the immediate road side to help the butt n' top load the incoming logging trucks. Robert reports the loadermen appreciate the system and so do the truckers who can get their load on and turn around faster.

Machine operators get used to dealing with the steady diet of small bug killed wood. Any new developments in material handling are of interest, though.

Equipment that can multi-stem small wood is an example. "We've been looking at it for sure," confirmed Robert. Maintaining quality standards is a top focus for the outfit. Canfor, like most licencees, has tight specifications governing the wood it requires, including precisely measured lengths. But appraising the different options is part of the logging contractor's oxygen: it's why they're out in the bush using the appropriate equipment for them to get the job done cost efficiently whatever the circumstances—or the weather—throws at them.