Logging ‘n lobsters

New Brunswick logging contractor Drew Conley juggles running a logging operation—with most of the wood going across the line, to Maine—with helping out in the family fishing outfit, catching lobster.

By George Fullerton

Drew Conley is something of an anomaly in the harvest contracting picture in New Brunswick. Conley is under 40-years-old, and he actually grew his operation through the most severe downturn in forest industry history.

Conley was born to and continues to take an active role in his family’s fishing enterprise on Deer Island, and he continues to work, seasonally, alongside his father in the Bay of Fundy lobster fishery.

His harvest contracting operation is based on Deer Island, but extends further, to service private woodlots on other islands in the Fundy archipelago and throughout the southwest mainland of New Brunswick. Conley also does some land clearing for highways, and residential or agriculture development.

The timber Conley harvests is marketed primarily to mills in Maine, and, quite naturally, he sees the strengthening U.S. dollar as a positive business indicator. He looks forward to increased demand for building products as the U.S. economy strengthens, and residential construction requires more wood building products.

Logging always held an attraction for Conley. Prior to his 20th birthday, poor fishing, poor prices for fish and poor fishing weather inspired him to buy his first cable skidder, a Timberjack 207, and to try on harvesting for a winter season.

Conley confessed that while he had the ambition to make a go of harvesting, he lacked a basic understanding of how harvesting with a cable skidder was done. To gain a basic knowledge of harvesting, Conley began his woods career volunteering for several days with an experienced crew working on Deer Island, and learned the basics of how to lay out cut block trails and set up the wood yard.

The Timberjack 207 was soon traded for a larger Timberjack skidder, and Conley began picking up stumpage blocks on Deer Island. The cable skidder was eventually supplemented by a second cable skidder, and then by a rail delimer. Conley then began hiring a feller buncher, and eventually bought his own Timberjack buncher, and then traded up to grapple skidders as the harvesting business grew.

Drew’s current equipment line includes a Timbco buncher with Quadco head, two John Deere 648 grapple skidders and a ProPac stroke delimer on a Samsung carrier. This tree length team is supplemented with a cable skidder assigned to small blocks and partial cut operations. A Prentice 325 loader on a Freightliner truck, with a ProPac tag-a-long slasher, usually stays with the cable skidder operation.
Trucking is a key part of the harvest operation and Conley gives high marks to General Logging and Trucking, operated by father and son John and Tom Donahue, who have provided years of service.

Conley notes that all his gear is purchased used, and sourced both in New Brunswick and Maine. Pointing to the ProPac delimber, Conley admits that while they have become fairly rare in New Brunswick forestry operations, they remain very popular in Maine and he can readily source any required parts.

And if the logging gear and crew—interspersed with fishing—might not seem enough to keep Conley fully occupied, he also carries on a small firewood operation. Conley has also planted some 75,000 trees (and other silviculture) on woodlots he owns.

The Deer Island economy is deeply rooted in the fishery, and Conley continues to crew for his father, Gary, when he needs extra hands. While Gary has dropped some fishing licenses, Drew and at least one of his woods crew don their wet weather gear twice a year and head out to the bay in Gary’s boat, ‘The Second Echo’, to set and tend lobster traps.

The spring fishing season runs April through to end of June. The autumn season, the most productive and most demanding on crews, begins in November and runs through to the end of December. While Drew and one (or two) of his operators are busy fishing with Gary, the mechanical harvest crew is cut back and the buncher and the delimber operators each take turns to operate one of the skidders to keep the operation balanced.

While several fishing villages and fish processing operations dot the Deer Island coast, the interior of the island is completely wooded, and the moist and cool maritime climate provides good growing conditions for the wood resource. Deer Island also has a vibrant summer tourism industry, and a good bit of real estate development, most often for vacation homes.

Conley’s stumpage comes both from island resident landowners and non-resident people buying and developing recreational and vacation homes.

“My clients are looking for a variety of harvest types and we operate to the best of our ability to achieve exactly what they want,” he explained. “We do both clear cuts and partial cut harvests.”

Conley added that a good number of his clients are looking for a harvesting system that removes brush and debris from the harvested land. He says that sort of request could be a reflection of urban sensibilities, requiring a ‘tidy’ post-harvest site rather than maintaining residual slash to provide nutrients and other biological benefits for future forest. Slash removal options also extend to land clearing projects for highways, blueberry development and residential developments.

Through the late summer and autumn of 2014, Conley’s harvesting team picked up a good deal of salvage
harvesting resulting from tropical storm Arthur, which knocked down a lot of wood across the province in early June.

Recently, Drew’s mechanical logging team was working on a non-resident land owner’s land, generating some stumpage revenue, while also maintaining a good deal of forest cover to enhance future vacation home development. The operation’s results pay tribute to the skills of buncher operator, Allan Knowles, who did a remarkable job harvesting mature trees and maintaining a good element of immature stocking, which suffered very little residual damage.

Conley and Knowles concurred that partial cutting with a buncher requires a lot of backing up and turning with the cut stems, to get the bunches properly oriented so skidders can head to the main trails without unnecessary damage to residual trees.

On their return trip to the woods from the delimber, the grapple skidder was taking a full load of brush, essentially to bandage wet spots on the trails.

“There is quite a bit of rock on Deer Island, and it is not at all surprising to step off a piece of ledge right onto very wet ground,” explained Conley. “The brush helps us to limit rutting those wet spots. When we finish this block, we will make sure the skidders travel on the edge of their trail to smooth any ridges down in the wheel tracks.”

While the forest industry in New Brunswick is decidedly moving to cut to length, Conley says there is still a place for tree length harvesting systems and adds that because he is close to the U.S. where most mills handle tree length wood, his operation supplies a lot of wood to those mills. He added that the U.S. mills are more competitive for his wood compared to New Brunswick mills, and are happy to see tree length, tree section as well as cut-to-length wood.

“There is very little competition in the wood markets in New Brunswick,” said Conley. “There is one major softwood consumer in the south of the province and they seem to have plenty of Crown wood at an attractive price, so they do not compete very hard at all for private land wood at all.

“On the other hand, there is lots of demand from U.S. mills, and most of them handle tree length. We’ve seen the exchange rate improve for selling to the U.S.—and lower fuel prices are providing us with a lot of optimism.

“From my perspective, there is simply no money in producing pulpwood to NB mills. The prices are so low that after production and trucking costs, there is no stumpage money for the landowner. I have talked to producers from the central part of the province who are simply leaving pulpwood in the woods, because it creates a net loss for them to handle it.”
Conley admits that it is a sad practice to see quality fibre go to waste, but the economics demonstrate that operators are further ahead to leave the pulp wood in the woods.

Conley says that producing tree length wood to the Dover-Foxcroft mill in central Maine means the pulp stays on the stem. It is slashed out at the sawmill and then chipped and marketed by the mill, eliminating concerns about producing and handling pulp wood.

Hardwood pulp either goes to the Flakeboard MDF mill (through the TAC wood yard) in St. Stephen, or just across the border to Woodland Pulp. Poplar is delivered to the FM Carson wood yard and then on to the Louisiana-Pacific mill near Houlton, (northern) Maine. Cedar goes to small local portable sawmills, and to Devon Lumber in Fredericton, NB.

Conley feels positive about the future of his forestry operation and readily recognizes the value of a dedicated crew with great mechanical skills and team focus, and especially a couple of operators who are willing and able to switch from skidder seat to pulling lobster traps for several weeks every year.

“If I was to say what my ambition for my harvesting business is, I would hope that one day I would see the forest industry provide me with the confidence and financial stability to buy a new piece of gear. But for now, we get along with a lot of attention to maintenance, and we get the wood delivered.”