



Returning to logging

The ongoing recovery has seen some contractors returning to the forest industry—New Brunswick’s Greg Davis and Wade Regan have now come back to the industry, and moved from a chainsaw/cable skidder operation to mechanical harvesting and a harvester/forwarder set-up, to better ensure their success.

By George Fullerton

Greg Davis and Wade Regan have made their way back to forestry. The two grew up around Durham Bridge on the Nashwaak River north of Fredericton, New Brunswick, and while forestry and harvesting has been part of their lives, they had left the industry while it was in its extended downturn. But with improved prospects for the industry, this pair of young entrepreneurs (both 35-years-old) have come back and made serious investments for their future.

While the pair teamed up under the banner of G&L Equipment Ltd. to invest in and operate a harvester and forwarder in 2013, their individual paths to that point had followed different routes.

As a young adult, Davis established himself as a cable skidder harvest contractor, providing forestry services to woodlots in central New Brunswick. Regan on the other hand, while maintaining an interest and part-time employment in forestry, established a landscaping business serving the Fredericton region.

Davis contracted into the depths of the forestry downturn, and he saw his ability to make a living with a chainsaw and skidder evaporate. He finally sold his skidder in 2010, and invested in an excavator and worked in residential development, basement excavation and driveway construction.

“I really didn’t like excavation and construction work much, and in 2013 we could see that forestry was beginning to make a comeback,” explained Davis. “Wade and I decided that was where we should be, so we began looking for an opportunity to return to contract harvesting.”

Davis fully understood that the ability to make a living with a chainsaw and cable skidder was past, and if they were to make a go of it, they needed to become mechanical harvesters.

With virtually no experience with mechanical harvesting equipment, the pair decided that they would approach this new enterprise with a good deal of caution and limit their investment as they tested the waters.

Their first harvester was a used Rocan Enviro harvester equipped with a LogMax 3000 head. Regan hopped into the operator’s seat with his cable skidder and excavator experience, and began the journey to becoming a harvester operator. A 1999 Timberjack 1010 forwarder was purchased to fill out the harvesting team.



In the contracting business, it is important to have clients to work for, of course. Davis began testing the waters to see if his old contacts were in a mood to do some harvesting. One of his first contacts was Yorg Beyler. Davis contracted for Beyler until the point in the downturn when they both agreed it was not economically feasible to harvest.

Beyler had left his fledgling career as a physical education teacher to become a forester in the early 1970s. While gaining his forestry degree at the University of New Brunswick, Beyler began buying cutover woodlots near the Village of Minto, with an eye toward long term management.

Over the years, Beyler has built his woodlot assets to several thousand acres in central New Brunswick.

Beyler's forestry career included being tree nursery manager with J. D. Irving for several years. He then went to work for the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources, initially to establish a nursery operation and forestry education centre in the Musquodobit Valley, and he later moved on to other managerial positions and retired as director of forestry.

While working in Nova Scotia, Beyler met a group of investors who formed Five Islands Forest Development Ltd., which shared Beyler's philosophy of investing in low value and cutover woodlands, carrying out silviculture (planting and pre-commercial thinning) and collecting on the long term investment when the woodlots would be harvested. After his retirement, Beyler assumed management responsibilities for several thousand acres of Five Islands' land in New Brunswick.

The current forest management on both Beyler's and Five Island's land is directed primarily toward commercial thinning and other partial cut harvesting systems.

Beyler responded positively to Davis' and Regan's ambition to mechanize, and sat down with them to scope out an agreement to contract commercial thinning and other harvesting work on both Beyler's and Five Islands' land. Beyler feels that together his needs and Five Islands' harvesting needs will potentially provide about ten years employment for Davis' and Regan's operation.

While learning to operate the harvester—and less so the forwarder—the pair also faced the significant challenge of servicing, maintaining and adjusting their machines. Early in the process, they contacted LogMax in Moncton to have a service technician visit their operation, to give them instruction and advice on servicing the harvester.

“Our equipment experience had basically been cable skidder and excavator, which is pretty basic mechanical technology,” said Davis. “With the mechanical harvesting equipment, we were quickly introduced to things like electric over hydraulic systems and computers.

“At first it was like hitting a technological wall—it was a whole new ball game for us. So getting a day of going



over the machines with the technicians was a critical step for us. We had a day with both LogMax and John Deere technicians and that gave us a good basic understanding of the mechanics of our machines.”

Davis went on to comment that both LogMax and the Fredericton Brandt Tractors staff have been very helpful, including on the phone, helping to figure out day to day snags.

On his return to the Moncton shop, the LogMax technician discussed with sales rep Rob Moran that this novice team of loggers might benefit from a visit, to offer a little more guidance on harvester operation.

While Moran possesses enviable sales talents, he came to sales after several years as a harvester operator and operator trainer.

Moran said that his initial visit was positive, and he found the novice operators very receptive to his advice and after demonstrating the potential of the machine, he continued to offer some coaching.

While Davis and Regan progressed along the learning curve with the harvester, they came to the realization that things needed to change on the equipment front.

Rob Moran came back into the picture and located a Timberjack 608 harvester with a LogMax 5000 head in Newfoundland, which replaced the Rocan/LogMax 3000 equipment set-up.

“We are a lot happier with the 608,” said Davis. “It is bigger, with better power and stability, and we’re comfortable with the excavator configuration. The 5000 head is faster and a lot more powerful, and has a lot more diameter capacity compared to the 3000.

“It is a lot better fit for the type of harvesting we are doing. We can handle a lot bigger range of diameters, and we are not afraid to tackle hardwoods. With increased familiarity with the harvester, we are at the point we are seriously considering moving up to a 6000 head,” he added.

Davis explained that as their proficiency with the mechanics and operating improved, they found their machine team had a fundamental imbalance.

“Once we had both machines operating productively, we found the forwarder capacity pushing the harvester’s production. We looked around to hire a harvester operator to put extra shifts on the 608, but that talent proved very hard to find.

“We eventually decided that Wade should train on the harvester and take it for a couple days through the week, and I would work it a few nights, and that would pretty well balance the forwarder capacity to harvester production.”



However, this past February found the 1010 forwarder foundering in record snow accumulation, aggravated by persistent deep cold temperatures. With the 1010 parked and a contracted eight-wheel forwarder hauling the wood, Regan went on day shift on the harvester and Davis filled out the nights.

“We each do a ten hour shift,” explained Davis. “Wade works the days which means he is able to see better in daylight hours while he learns to operate. He had excavator experience, so basically it has been a matter of learning the buttons for operating the head, and he has been doing really well.”

Since going back to work for Beyler, the harvesting has been focussing on commercial thinning in plantations and old pre-commercial thinned stands, and a partial cut harvest strategy for natural stands with commercial wood.

“Our ultimate management strategy is to maintain a good deal of our woodland in a multi-age, multi-species condition, dominated by tolerant species,” explained Beyler, referring to his owned woodlots, as well as Five Islands land.

“On the other hand, we typically patch (clear) cut stands dominated by balsam fir and poplar. We are putting a focus on harvesting balsam fir in particular because we are pretty confident that we will soon see the spruce budworm population peak, and we know it will eventually kill a good deal of the balsam fir all across the region, before the population collapses.”

While Beyler prefers to see about 80 per cent of the harvest activity as partial cuts and commercial thinning, Davis suggests that target might change with an increased emphasis on harvesting balsam fir. “When balsam fir gets 35 to 40 years old, it generally starts to decline with stain and rot. A lot of the (formerly PCT) thinned stands are reaching that age and it needs harvesting. Additionally, as budworm becomes a threat, harvesting becomes all the more important, and we may see more patch cuts that clean up the fir.”

While Davis and Regan have gained a good deal of proficiency carrying out partial cut harvesting, they realize that site and species mix have a huge impact on the success of the type of management.

“It appears that it is very important to critically evaluate site, soil type and species mix to have a wind-firm, post-harvest, stand. Some places, we seem to have great success, and other sites it is less successful. Partial cuts seem to work very well on relatively dry soils types, especially areas with a mix of pine, spruce and tolerant hardwoods. That type of site tends to have deeper richer and drier soils and trees that can tolerate wind. On the other hand, on wet site soils the trees do not seem to root as well, and we see those sites experience more windthrow.”

Beyler declares he is looking forward to a positive and productive working relationship with Davis and Regan. “I have a significant land base to manage and I need a contractor with the right attitude toward forest



management. They have a good understanding of the type of work I want, and as our comfort level has grown, the need for close supervision has declined. It's a good relationship—we all want to be in it for the long haul.”

Wade Regan (far left) and Greg Davis have made their way back to working in the New Brunswick forest industry. They left the industry while it was in its extended downturn. But with improved prospects for the industry, this pair of young entrepreneurs (both 35-years-old) have come back and made serious equipment investments.