



Deere delivers with new 748L skidder

The new John Deere 748L skidder is helping Alberta logging operation Forest Trotter Contracting be more productive, especially on hilly ground—and offers more operator comfort, to boot.

By Tony Kryzanowski

While logging on its own is a stressful business venture, logging in northern Alberta's muskeg region has a way of adding to that business stress because of the short production window that is available.

Forest Trotter Contracting Ltd. has just made a major new investment in John Deere's new 748L skidder to ensure maximum production and uptime when they need it in these kind of tough spots.

Based in LaCrete, Alberta, Forest Trotter Contracting is one division of a three company partnership that includes another logging company, Exact Harvesting, and a large road building division, Northern Roadbuilders. The owners are Philip Unrau, Harvey Wolfe and David Driedger.

Forest Trotter Contracting started out in 1998—at that time, Unrau was an employee of the company. He bought the company with Wolfe and Driedger when the owner decided to sell out in 2009. In addition to logging, the company also has a strong background in forest reclamation and environmental work, as well as road building, which explains to some extent its three divisions today.

“I grew up in logging,” says Unrau. “My dad used to log for the local sawmills for as long as I can remember. I always lived in camp and grew up in the industry.”

Forest Trotter Contracting is a stump-to-dump contractor that logs for the Tolko Industries sawmill in High Level, Weyerhaeuser in Grande Prairie, and the Norbord oriented strandboard (OSB) plant in High Level, harvesting a total of 650,000 cubic metres annually. The majority is softwood, with 50,000 cubic metres of hardwood for the Norbord plant. The softwood harvest is 300,000 cubic metres each for Tolko and Weyerhaeuser. The average diameter of the logs is 10” to 12”.

While they only have one wood deck of generally 16 ‘ logs for Norbord, there are three log sorts at roadside for Tolko based on diameter, with the majority in 20’ lengths. Logging for Weyerhaeuser is still tree length, with a sawlog and pulpwood sort at roadside.

Unrau says that the logging done in the Grande Prairie area for Weyerhaeuser occurs throughout most of the year, with many oil and gas access roads already available to reach forest cutblocks. The terrain is generally hilly within the cutblocks themselves.



Logging for Tolko and Norbord further north is a different story. There is only a short window of logging for the Tolko sawmill and Norbord OSB plant because of the muskeg terrain where wood is harvested, and unlike the Grande Prairie area, there is little to no existing access to forest cutblocks.

“In the north here, it’s kind of swamp logging,” says Unrau. “You have to cross a lot of swamps just to get to the wood. So we have to wait for winter, build ice roads and start our season after November and log until the end of March.”

The company uses a low ground pressure Bombardier BR275 snow groomer—the same machine that is used to groom ski hills—as an initial step to prepare the ground so that it freezes for building access roads to their cutblocks.

What helps is that the area around High Level gets colder, faster, and it generally stays cold all winter as it is located in the extreme northern part of the province. In late fall, the grass is bladed down and then trucks add water to freeze and harden the surface. As soon as the roads are deemed hard enough for heavy truck traffic, the logging equipment is hauled in—and the season begins.

Normally, accessing cutblocks is the biggest issue. Once in the blocks and the roads are frozen in, the logging works well but there is that constant pressure to maintain production and have a backup plan in the event that a piece of equipment has unexpected downtime.

“The challenge is always to produce the volume you expect in four months,” says Unrau.

While the logging season is longer further south in the Grande Prairie region, the fact that it is warmer presents its own challenges from an equipment standpoint. Warm weather in winter, which can sometimes occur in the area around Grande Prairie, is not the logger’s friend, and it takes longer for the ground to freeze.

“We have more problems with Weyerhaeuser in Grande Prairie with skidders needing more flotation and wide pads on the bunchers so they don’t sink,” says Unrau. “It’s so warm that the ground just doesn’t freeze as much. On our new John Deere 748L skidder, we installed wider tires and that helps a lot.”

Overall, their fleet consists of three John Deere 853G feller bunchers and four Tigercat 870C feller bunchers. Their skidder fleet consists of the new John Deere 748L skidder with another one on order, two John Deere 848H skidders, two John Deere 748G III skidders, two Tigercat 630D skidders, a Tigercat 630C skidder, a Tigercat 615C skidder, and a Caterpillar 525 skidder.

They bought two new John Deere 2154 processor carriers last year. One is equipped with a Waratah 622 BII processing head and one with a Waratah 622 C processing head. They also have a John Deere 2054 delimeter carrier.



Their log loader fleet consists of a John Deere 892E, a Caterpillar 325C, a Caterpillar 330LL, a Caterpillar 330L, a Caterpillar 330BL, a John Deere 3754D, and a Tigercat 880.

Their extensive road building fleet consists of a variety of Caterpillar dozers in various sizes, as well as a Hitachi ZX330LC excavator, a John Deere 270LC excavator, and a Caterpillar 322L excavator.

Unrau says Forest Trotter Contracting has operated John Deere 748 GIII skidders for about 10 years and have noticed a number of upgrades on the new 748L model.

“The John Deere 748L has a nicer cab and offers more operator comfort,” says Unrau, “and it’s better balanced.”

On the older John Deere 748 skidders, they noticed that the weight was lighter in front which made it difficult to start a heavy drag on hills if the ground was frozen. With the new model, the front end does not lift up at the start of a drag, so it is a smooth process.

“We did a couple of trials on hills with the 748L and the 848H, and that 748L pulled bigger drags than the 848H could pull on flat ground,” says Unrau. “We’re getting good results.”

He adds that the new John Deere 748L skidder makes their operation much more productive, especially on hilly ground. In the past, their bunchers were laying down half bunches for the skidders to pull up hills. That is no longer necessary with the John Deere 748L.

“We should be almost cutting our cycle time in half by being able to pull full drags up the hills rather than dragging half loads,” says Unrau.

He adds that John Deere has also ‘beefed up’ what was on the older 748 GIII models. For example, he says the centre bearing where the 748L skidder articulates is about double the size of older units.

In terms of maintenance, he says there is good access to the whole machine and they are consuming a reasonable amount of fuel compared to the amount of wood that the skidder is transporting.

From an operational standpoint, Unrau says that putting a greener operator on the unit should not be a challenge based on how user friendly the controls are designed.

“I jumped on the machine when we did a demo and I hadn’t been on a skidder as an operator so it would have been like me being a new operator,” he says. “Everything felt like it was in the right position.”



Unrau had operated bunchers and excavators, and being that the John Deere 748L is controlled with joysticks, he says it felt like sitting in a tracked machine.

“I think it is going to be very good for making use of new operators,” says Unrau. “Seasoned operators coming off the John Deere 848H, they get used to it very quickly.”

Forest Trotter Contracting is in the process of further renewing their fleet and have purchased a new John Deere 953M feller buncher, another John Deere 748L skidder, and a John Deere 2154 processor carrier, as well as a Tigercat 880 log loader and an Tigercat 870 feller buncher, some of which are dedicated to their Exact Harvesting operation.

The cost to Canadian logging contractors of replacing equipment because of the Canadian dollar exchange rate versus the American dollar continues to be front of mind for many. For example, Unrau says it will cost about \$100,000 more to replace his feller buncher today vs. what it would have cost a year ago.

Finding enough qualified operators continues to be a major challenge, although Unrau says it has gotten a bit better with the downward spiral of the oil and gas industry.

“The more cubic metres you push through a machine in an hour, that’s what makes you money and you can only do that with good, qualified, experienced operators,” says Unrau.

Despite the challenges, Unrau says that the company is interested in growth and potentially taking on more volume, adding that he looks at all options and if they are able to take on more volume or a new contract, he looks at all offers seriously.