



The little town— and sawmill—that could...

The small town of Midway, B.C. has partnered up with savvy small wood experts Vaagen Bros. to produce Canada's newest sawmill, utilizing HewSaw equipment and a squad of very enthusiastic local contractors and suppliers.

By Paul MacDonald

In an industry that is still in the midst of recovery mode, the start-up of the sawmill in the small town of Midway, B.C., comes as tremendous news.

It's the story of a town that never says die partnering up with a sawmill operator that epitomizes the term, "small wood experts".

But it has been a haul. Just ask Mark Deverson, the plant manager for Vaagen Fibre Canada, whose task has been to take a sawmill that has been shut down for four years, figure out what is salvageable, and then bring a brand new small log mill into production.

Deverson recalls his first day on the job, in early May. "This place was pitch black. We had no lights—we had to walk around with flashlights for three days before we were able to turn on the some MCCs and get some light. We had one small explosion because copper thieves had cut through one of the cables. We had some adventures.

"Like I tell my boss, Russ Vaagen, this is the hardest thing I've ever done, but it's the most fun I've ever had," says the enthusiastic Deverson, who grew up in a relatively small sawmill town himself, Fort St. James, B.C.

Oregon-based Pope & Talbot Inc., who owned the Midway sawmill, which is located in B.C.'s Southern Interior, and operated it for close to 40 years, went under in 2007. Another company, Fox Forest Products, bought the sawmill, and briefly operated a pallet manufacturing operation there, before shutting that down.

Deverson noted the mill was the victim of the massive industry downturn, rather than being poorly operated.

"When the Midway mill went down, it was a well producing mill," he says. "The last numbers on the last shift on the production clock—and remember they weren't running the headrig then—was 275,000 board feet for the shift.

"Everybody at the mill knew it was going down, but they were told that it was going to be a two week shutdown, so the log bins were still full of wood."

Deverson explained that when he started, Vaagen Bros. already had a conceptual plan for the Midway mill. The Washington State-based company has two sawmills, at Colville and Usk, and specializes in small log sawmilling—and they are huge fans of HewSaw equipment and running small wood. "That's all they run—small wood—and they're fast and efficient," says Deverson. "The Midway mill actually marks the fourth HewSaw unit the Vaagen Bros. have installed."



Just how big a fan are the Vaagen Brothers? “They’ve restored the first HewSaw they bought years ago and put it in their cabin,” says Deverson.

The HewSaw unit they installed at Midway was part of a larger purchase of HewSaw equipment from Domtar some years ago but it was never used.

“Vaagen Bros brought it up here, sent it to HewSaw in Vancouver, where it was stripped down completely, right to the frame,” explains Deverson. “It was basically made into what HewSaw calls a sawmill racehorse. All the 125 hp motors were upgraded to 250 hp—there is a total of 1400 hp in that one little unit.” Prologic+ provided the log optimization going into the HewSaw.

They also bought a HewSaw log turner from Finland, which Deverson said is “amazing”.

“I’ve been in sawmilling all of my life, and when I saw one of those log turners running on YouTube, my jaw hit the floor. I have not seen anything like that, and now we have one.” Five bins will batch feed five separate log diameters into the mill.

With such high performance equipment, says Deverson, the little town of Midway, British Columbia now has one of the best small log sawmills in Canada, meaning that it also has one of the best small log sawmills in North America.

“We are taking what was a three line mill, with two reman loops, and replacing it with one HewSaw line, and we are looking to beat what the old mill used to do with their three lines, with that one line.”

All of this was done on a relatively shoestring budget—about \$8 million. “We’ve got a very tight budget compared to the Canfor’s and Interfor’s of this world.” Deverson says they have had to be very resourceful to work within that \$8 million budget. Case in point: they backfilled the basement of one of the sawmill buildings they removed so they could get the crane in closer, so they could use a smaller crane. “We were able to get a small crane from Gwil Crane and pull it right in to get the existing machinery out and get the HewSaw equipment in,” he explains.

Before installing a single piece of equipment, they took out a fair bit of the original mill, about 45,000 square feet. “We did not need the old building. It was in bad shape, with water pouring in through the roof. And we now have bins three, four and five where the old building was.” These three bins accompany the existing two log bins. They were able to generate some revenue from the demolition. Two old Mark II Chip-N-Saw systems were sold, as was the USNR edger optimizer system. The old 24 inch square fir timbers from the old portion of the building were snapped up quickly.

With that done, they worked in a bit of the new with the existing equipment. They installed a new slash deck system, they have two existing A5 debarkers that will be used, and the existing trim line and 65 bin sort system are both being used, as is an existing revolving log loader system.

“When the mill was shut down, this equipment was left in great shape, and that has really helped us,” says Deverson.

“I was expecting it to be a lot worse. But we have not run into any great big bumps except computer issues. Things have been firing up after not being run for five years, without any problems. I was a bit scared firing up the hog. I was thinking



that with an 18,000 pound rotor, the bearings would be dimpled. But we fired it up and we did a vibration analysis on the bearings and they were fine.”

Deverson says that he was not too surprised that the equipment was relatively undamaged. Thieves were generally looking for a fast buck, so they focused on copper wiring. “What burned me was that thieves took a foot out of a MCC feeder cable, and we had to replace 200 feet of cable for \$15,000 because you can’t put a junction box in.”

In the end, little of the existing mill equipment was used. The conveyor system went, as did both Mark II systems. “The equipment just didn’t fit the profile. One of the Mark IIs was a 22-inch, and the other was a 16 inch, and the HewSaw is 13.8 inches, maximum.”

The new, small log equipment has required a change in approach at the mill, Deverson says.

“If the Mark II equipment went down for five or ten minutes, you lost 20 logs. If the HewSaw goes down, and we are running the 2 X 4 pattern with the smallest logs, we will lose 20 logs in one minute.

“On the small wood, we would like to run 650 feet per minute. With the HewSaw, it’s a production by the minute machine, not by the hour.”

The biggest thing they have been using from the existing mill is the structural steel. They pulled out the steel, and Deverson re-designed the framing and floor plans using that steel. “That saved us a ton of money. And we took down the lights carefully, and put them back up.”

Deverson takes great pride in the mill employees and contractor employees who have brought the Midway mill back to operation (see sidebar story for the supplier list). These companies include Kettle Valley Electric, which was started by an electrician from the mill who had been laid off when it shut down five years ago. “The contractors helped us schedule work to save money, and came up with ideas to save a few bucks here, a few bucks there. We all worked together as a team, and they went out of their way to make sure this was a successful project.”

As for Vaagen Bros, which is based only an hour away from Midway, “not only are they putting their money and expertise into the project, they are putting their heart”.

Expert small log sawmillers Vaagen Bros. have been looking to expand into this area of B.C. for years. “They knew there was a lot of small timber here that no one was using, and no one wanted.” Vaagen Bros. worked on coming up with a deal with the mill’s owners, Fox Forest Products, a few years’ back, but that did not come together in the end. It took a separate company, Boundary Sawmills Inc., owned by investors from the towns of Greenwood and Midway, to buy the mill. It has leased it back to Vaagen Bros. Lumber produced at the mill will be trucked to the Vaagen Bros. mill in Colville, which has a brand new Coastal planer that is not running to capacity. “We’re going to do that for now,” says Deverson. “But if the lumber market goes well, hopefully we’ll put on a second shift at Midway in June. And our long term goal is to produce so much wood that they can’t keep up with the planer in Colville, and we’ll be able to start the planer here.

“But Rome wasn’t built in a day. We’re going to start small, be efficient, and do things well.”



The mill does not have any tenure. Fibre procurement specialist Chris Waters sources wood through private timber sales, and works with woodlot owners. And they also do a fair bit of trading large logs for the smaller logs then need. “They don’t want the smaller stuff, and we don’t want the large stuff, so it’s a win-win,” says Deverson.

While the building of the new mill was essentially fast-tracked, the start-up will be a bit more measured. They have come up with sawmill patterns to initially run off two log bins. “We’re going to be doing a lot of sorting in the yard for the first month or two.”

The plan is to complete the installation of the three new bins, install some specialized high speed unscrambling equipment to feed the infeed, and start out producing steady. “We’re looking to be running full tilt in January,” says Deverson. And the sawmill has 42 new and dedicated employees—some of whom worked at the predecessor Pope & Talbot sawmillare working very hard to achieve that goal.