



Still a place for mill-owned logging operation

Westside Logging illustrates there is still a place in a successful sawmill business model for mill ownership of logging operations—and that it can deliver solid benefits, such as an extra level of direction and control in the bush.

By Tony Kryzanowski

Many Canadian forest companies are contemplating changes to their business model, with the goal of producing less commodity grade lumber and more higher value lumber aimed at niche markets. However, that type of change requires a higher level of quality control throughout the manufacturing process.

Quesnel, B.C.-based, C & C Wood Products is demonstrating how to maintain quality control right from the forest floor to the customer door starting with ownership of their own logging equipment in both B.C. and Alberta, operating as Westside Logging. Their model shows that in some circumstances, it can make sense for lumber producers focused on the specialty wood market to assume direct control over their logging operations and logging trucks rather than depending solely on contractors. They do hire a few contractors through the busy winter months, though.

The company purchased a mothballed sawmill previously owned by Weyerhaeuser in Grande Cache, Alberta about six years ago and named it Foothills Forest Products, with the intention of installing a line to manufacture wood paneling, the first of its kind in the province.

They liked the smaller diameter wood in the Grande Cache forest management area because of its tighter knots, making it excellent feedstock for wood paneling. It already produces 4” tongue and groove paneling in its Quesnel operations. However, at present the mill continues to operate strictly as a dimension lumber sawmill because of a couple of untimely occurrences—first, the passing of company founder, Joe Cerasa, and then the severe downturn in the forest products industry.

While the project has been delayed, Westside Logging’s Alberta supervisor Joe Giesbrecht is confident that installation of the paneling line will happen. The building is in place, the equipment has been installed, and Foothills Forest Products has manufactured some test paneling.

With 37 years of logging experience and as an employee of Westside Logging for the past 20 years, Giesbrecht has experience on both sides of the fence, working as both a logging contractor, and more recently, supervising the Foothills Forest Products logging fleet.

He says company-owned logging operations weren’t all that uncommon in the industry in the past, although they are not that common today.

“There is good and bad about it, naturally,” says Giesbrecht. “If the mill doesn’t use the logging outfit properly, it could cost a lot of money.” For example, he says there is the temptation among sawmill employees to reassign equipment from the logging fleet to other company activities without regard to the actual cost of using the equipment in areas other than their designated purpose.



While having easier access to the equipment does provide the mill with an advantage, Giesbrecht says use of the equipment in this way only works if staff understand the true cost of reassigning the equipment. There is a danger to view the use of the equipment as free. However, it is important to cost out the use of the equipment with all company staff to ensure all employees understand that regardless of ownership, there still is a cost in wages, wear and tear, and fuel by putting the equipment to use in areas other than logging. He says that staff at Foothills Forest Products are cognizant of the costs when requesting a temporary reassignment of logging equipment for such tasks as maintaining the log yard.

Westside Logging harvested just over 300,000 cubic metres of lodgepole pine during the 2009-2010 logging season in a way that most other logging contractors would describe as unconventional. March 31 is just a day on the company calendar—but that day represents the last day of harvesting operations for many logging contractors in Alberta and usually the end of their annual contract. Not so with Westside Logging.

“We can pretty much log where we want and when we want once you get the blocks approved from the government,” says Giesbrecht. And they do. During the winter months, most logging operations occur in the cutblock. However, as spring breakup nears, the mill has received government permission to transport and stockpile tree length logs in one of four designated satellite yards along main roads owned by the sawmill. The mill doesn’t have to worry about paying the logger for stockpiled timber, because they own the logger. Processing and delivery continues throughout the spring while other contractors are done logging till summer. So, there is no real panic to meet a set log delivery deadline at Foothills Forest Products. Furthermore, the company is able to withstand the challenges of situations like a shortage of contract log trucks and truck drivers, as was the case last winter. Again, because their logging season is not impacted by a contract, they have more flexibility to organize trucking throughout the year.

In addition to giving Foothills Forest Products control over how much timber is stored in the mill yard, having direct control over their logging operations allows the company to tightly control the timber quality and dimensions it harvests from its cutblocks, although most other sawmills do maintain close supervision and sorting of logs with their contractors. However, with logging operated as a direct arm of the company, there is that extra level of control. Giesbrecht adds that because logging is company-owned and controlled, employees working in the logging branch are expected to set an example for contractors by meeting set log length tolerances on a consistent basis.

To maintain that quality, C & C Wood Products purchased seven Log Max 7000 processor heads for use in both their Grande Cache and Quesnel operations a few years ago. In Grande Cache, the processing heads are mounted on two Caterpillar 320C carriers and on a Link-Belt carrier. Logs are processed to four lengths—16’5”, 14’5”, 12’5” and 10’4”, with only a one-inch tolerance in either direction.

Charge Hand Alex Chisholm says that the Log Max heads are very accurate in their measurements, and with several years in service, he estimates that Westside Logging has achieved about 75 per cent uptime.

He adds that LogMax has also offered excellent technical support from their field service technician in Kamloops, Barry Peters, who can often walk them through computer programming issues and quickly get processors back up and operating.

Processor operators ensure their heads are measuring accurately by taking four manual measurements of 10 to 12 logs, four times per shift. They match manual measurements with readings shown on the computer readout in the cab, and fine-tune measurement calibrations, if needed.



In terms of log diameter, logs 16” and over are set aside and sold to other sawmills. There are three additional sorts at roadside for logs destined for the mill, with 7” being the break point between the large and small sawlog sort. There is also a sort for balsam poplar.

The remainder of Westside Logging’s fleet consists of a new John Deere 903K feller buncher as well as a John Deere 903J feller buncher and a John Deere 853J feller buncher. They have three skidders—a Caterpillar 545 grapple skidder, a Caterpillar 535 grapple skidder, and a John Deere 748 GIII skidder. Rounding out their fleet are a Caterpillar D8N dozer and a D6 dozer, along with a Caterpillar 325 excavator and a John Deere 270D excavator.

What attracted Westside Logging to the John Deere 903K feller buncher was that it was the proper size for the smaller diameter trees the company is harvesting, and it had many similar components to their older 853J, such as the carbody and boom. The company also liked the head’s 360 degree rotation capabilities, and what really helped seal the deal is that local John Deere dealer, Brandt Tractor, has a resident mechanic located in Grande Cache. It also passed muster on operator comfort, as each operator gave it a test drive. One operator found that the handles were too low, so John Deere performed an update and raised the handles for him. The fact that the 903K was “quite a bit easier on fuel” also was a critical part of the deal. The cab computer tracks fuel consumed per hour, so the company knows exactly how much fuel the feller buncher is burning. That feature alone has helped diagnose problems such as a recent spike in fuel consumption noted by operators, indicating that some of the injectors had to be replaced.

In terms of equipment maintenance, Westside Logging does its best to stay on top of equipment requirements as it carries out logging operations. One benefit with operators being employees is that when a machine is due for maintenance, the operator is available to assist the mechanic. That is another notable difference between contractors and company-owned logging in that members of the logging crew are actual employees of the company, meaning that they have close to year-round employment. All told, there are about 20 workers in the logging division. Westside Logging offers comparable pay to their employees as is offered by contractors.

“Most people that come to work for Westside Logging tend to stick around for a while,” says Giesbrecht. “Most of the guys have been here 10 to 15 years.” He adds that is a reflection of how employees are treated by company owners, noting that his own tenure with the company is a couple of decades.