



Making their logging mark

The next generation of the Gordon family—a trio of brothers— is learning the ropes at Dean Gordon Trucking, ready to make their own mark in the logging business.

By Tony Kryzanowski

Like many other logging contractors, Edson, Alberta-based logger Dean Gordon Trucking is working hard to find its business “sweet spot”. That’s the place where their logging fleet, harvesting volume, size of their workforce, and work week all translate into the highest potential profitability while also maintaining an attractive work environment for employees.

“More volume doesn’t always translate into more income,” says Neil Poulsen, the company’s operations manager.

The company has harvested as much as 260,000 cubic metres annually for Weyerhaeuser, but has made a conscious choice to reduce that to within the 150,000 to 180,000 cubic metre range for the time being. That’s largely because of how competitive it is to fill job vacancies due to the high level of oil and gas and mining activity also taking place in the Edson area. Poulsen says it’s been a challenge to find the required complement of quality employees to take on higher harvesting volume.

“You can buy all the equipment you want, but if you don’t have people to put in the cab, it’s a struggle,” says Poulsen. The company has 25 employees now, but at one time had as many as 40 employees, and worked many night shifts when it was producing more volume.

“We noticed in the first year of downsizing volume that there was more money left on the table at the end of the year compared to when we were doing 260,000 cubic metres,” says Poulsen.

The company is undergoing an interesting evolution. The logging business has treated company owner Dean Gordon well, and now he is giving his three sons a chance to make a good living in the industry, if that’s what they choose to do.

Dean Gordon Trucking is a stump-to-dump contractor, supplying hardwood to Weyerhaeuser’s oriented strandboard (OSB) plant in Edson and softwood to its sawmill in Drayton Valley. Gordon worked as a logging contractor in Fort Nelson, British Columbia for 27 years, supplying logs for the now mothballed Tackama plywood plant. That logging contact required the business to operate in the winter for three months a year, 24 hours a day.

After leaving Fort Nelson, Gordon purchased a farm in Lacombe, Alberta. An opportunity arose to jump back into the logging business in Alberta with Weyerhaeuser and Gordon took advantage of it. He has worked with Weyerhaeuser for the past eight years and recently constructed a 10,000 square foot, custom-designed shop and head office in Edson.

Logging industry veteran Neil Poulsen manages the company’s logging division. He is 64 years old and brings 40 years of experience in both harvesting and hauling operations in Alberta and British Columbia to the job. That experience includes owning and operating his own logging truck prior to joining Dean Gordon Trucking.



His job description involves a lot more than overseeing day-to-day operations. For the past six years, Dean Gordon's oldest son, Brent, has worked as the company's harvesting supervisor. Gordon's middle son, Mathew is a skidder operator and is learning to operate the feller buncher. Gordon's youngest son, Luke, operates a processor. Part of Poulsen's job is to teach all three the ropes of the logging business, providing them with the opportunity to possibly one day take ownership of the company. Their apprenticeship has included learning how to operate the equipment, graduating to more challenging jobs and equipment operation once they have demonstrated mastery of each piece of equipment along the way.

"They are all looking forward to going into the business," says Poulsen. "The boys realize that their dad is setting a pretty high standard for all of them, and basically this will be their future."

After high school, Brent began working for an insulation company in B.C. and after five years he managed to rise fairly quickly to a more senior position. But the work environment didn't appeal to him.

"I just couldn't see myself spending another 40 years working inside a plant," he says. When his father gave him the opportunity to join him in logging, Brent and his new bride decided it was worth taking the chance, and moved to Alberta.

"I feel I've made the right decision. I am really happy doing my job and being outside in the fresh air all the time," he says. "Nature is probably the best office you can ask for."

Brent has learned a lot working in the field over the past six years, adding that "modern day logging doesn't allow for much money to flow through the cracks. If you mind your cents, your dollars will take care of themselves. But with a large group like we had, it became hard to manage."

The company's log mix is about 75 per cent hardwood and 25 per cent softwood, with the softwood volume a combination of both cut-to-length and tree length. The hardwood averages 12" to 15" in diameter and is processed to 8.5' lengths. The softwood averages 20" in diameter with two sorts at roadside based on diameter. Logging typically takes place within an hour of Edson, with the logs transported primarily by their own fleet.

Their goal is to log 10 months a year. Poulsen says what affects their harvesting season more than anything else is the nesting period for migratory birds. Weyerhaeuser has worked hard to keep the company busy as long as possible by offering them a "spring cut", when the roads into the bush become impassible due to spring break-up, which has helped to extend the season. Also, Dean Gordon Trucking is investigating various other opportunities to keep their equipment and employees working longer, which will help to retain employees.

Their fleet consists of a John Deere 953K feller buncher, a John Deere 903K feller buncher, two Deere 748H grapple skidders, a John Deere 2554 carrier with an 825 Hornet attachment, two Deere 2954 carriers with 624C Waratah processing heads, a Deere 2954 carrier with an 825 Hornet attachment, a Komatsu 270 butt 'n top loader with a clam grapple attachment, and a Komatsu 250 butt 'n top loader. Support equipment includes a Komatsu 220 track hoe, a Deere 850J dozer and a Deere 770CH grader. The company also has nine logging trucks.

Brent says the company is careful to design its logging fleet so it matches up well with its wood basket. For example, the 624C Waratah processing head can handle up to a 33" diameter tree because there are times when operators will encounter larger diameter hardwood.



“Our Hornets can handle it, but the Waratahs, with the extra drive wheel and their ability to clamp better onto the trees, can sometimes handle the large wood a little bit better than the Hornets,” says Brent.

Poulsen adds that the company needed to upgrade to the larger Waratah processing head because hardwoods are generally tougher, with extra wear and tear on the equipment. They noticed it when they attempted to process their wood using a smaller Waratah head. He adds that the Hornet processing heads, with their butt plate measuring control system, are well-suited for processing a steady diet of hardwoods based on his extensive experience using them with other logging contractors.

They are pleased with the computer control system for the Hornet, provided by Javelin Technical Solutions located in Grande Prairie.

“Javelin Technical Solutions has created a very user friendly and simple system,” says Brent. The computer control system is designed specifically for use in a forestry application.

“The system is just relays inside the computer,” says Brent. “If we have a problem with any of our functions, it’s just a two dollar and fifty cent relay that gets pulled out and a new relay put in, and away we go again.”

Dean Gordon Trucking has two feller buncher sizes because they have found that the smaller John Deere 903K buncher with the 22 “ head works a bit faster than the 953K model with its 24” head. Each has a Loewen high rotation wrist for 180 degree rotation.

“That’s really important for harvesting in tight situations,” says Brent. “It allows the buncher operator to cut wood in different positions without having to move himself around. It provides him with more options as to where he lays down his bunches, depending on what area he is in.”

The company has favored John Deere logging equipment because of the performance Dean Gordon has experienced with Deere equipment going as far back as the days when he logged in Fort Nelson. Equipment was also readily available even during the recent severe downturn in the Canadian forest industry. Poulsen adds that Brandt Tractor in Edmonton provides very good service support for the equipment when they need it.

The terrain where Dean Gordon Trucking logs is generally flatter ground, with their biggest challenge being draws that Brent says can have slopes as high as 55 per cent. In that case, the feller buncher operator will leave a buffer around that area, because even if they are able to harvest the timber, the slope is often too steep for the skidder operator to retrieve the logs. Site selection for harvesting between summer and winter can be challenging, as there are some areas within the Weyerhaeuser Forest Management Area (FMA) that can only be harvested when the ground is frozen in winter.

Both Brent and Neil say that Dean Gordon Trucking was dealt with “very fairly” by Weyerhaeuser throughout the recent downturn. Adjustments were made to production at the OSB plant in Edson to keep them busy throughout the logging season, which helped them manage their balance sheet and keep their workforce intact. They do sense an upswing in the demand for forest products and are looking forward to a bright future with the three Gordon brothers potentially