



Making a Niche

Pacific Logging and Processing

By Andrea Watts

As Darren Hall sees it, “there are bold cutters and old cutters but not bold, old cutters.”

After being a bold cutter for 20 years, Hall realized a career change was necessary so he could become an old cutter. Though Hall didn’t know he was starting a brand-new logging company just before the recession, he found an overlooked niche, which enabled his company to survive and be poised for growth in a rebounding market.

As the owner of Pacific Logging and Processing, Hall brings 25 years of experience in the industry to each job site. A 4th generation logger, Hall says, “I have been on the stump since I could walk.” He formally entered the industry at 19 years old as a timber faller for International Paper. During his career, he worked for Weyerhaeuser and other companies as a contractor, and at one point, he oversaw 23 fallers. Hall traded the chainsaw for the shovel in 2005, and while he recognizes the change is for the better, he admits finding it hard to sit still.

Getting Jobs

Centralia-based Pacific Logging and Processing takes jobs within a 100-mile radius around its base of operation—spanning north to Maple Valley, south to the Columbia River, and east to the edge of the Cascades.

Instead of being a contractor for the well-known timber companies in the area, Hall primarily works for small-scale private landowners. “‘Permits to planting’ is how I describe our services because we handle everything for the landowner including marketing, surveys, and roadwork,” Hall says.

Jobs are acquired through word of mouth and referrals, and he strives to meet the landowner’s needs because “one bad word goes further than a good word.”

Sustainable Forestry Key

Sustainable forestry of their forestland is the management goal of the landowners with whom Hall works. He says, “95 percent of the landowners I work for view it as a resource.”

For owners with large parcels, Hall creates five-year management plans that balance the needs of a steady cash flow while generating a long-term sustainable yield. And unlike companies that operate on timberlands in rural counties far from the public’s eye, Hall doesn’t have such a luxury. On the 16-acre job site in Yelm, Wash., the work called for clear cutting a stand of 104-year-old Douglas fir that had root rot, and the resulting clearing meant the neighboring residents were losing a territorial view of what was once a forest.

Hall says that every agency had been out to survey the operation, and he takes the scrutiny in stride. “There are so many eyes on you in the private world, and we take precautions when working in sensitive areas by doing just a little extra,” he explains.

Hall has experience working on FSC-certified timberland, and though his company isn’t FSC-certified to keep the chain of custody intact, he would consider becoming FSC certified when the market rewards such certification.



Keeping Crews Busy

Though you might not expect jobs for small, family forestland owners to generate the volumes necessary to keep Hall's crew busy year-round, he says, "Generally we don't have any downtime unless we choose it."

An average job has 60-80 loads moving 300-400 bf, which keeps one to two trucks busy each day, and Hall adds that his company moves six million feet a year. Their busiest times are April and November just prior to tax season when landowners are looking to take advantage of tax breaks.

Hall handles all the marketing himself, and his end goal is "making the landowner the most money." The mills he works with include Butteville Lumber in Onalaska, where his company has earned the reputation of sending them the good logs they want. He also cites a good working relationship with Weyerhaeuser's Dan Moore.

Riding the Recession

While Hall actually cut more during the recession than prior years, he still didn't fully escape the higher costs of doing business, and it impacted his equipment portfolio and operations.

"When I started my company, Pape Machinery in Kelso, Wash., set me up with a brand-new Hitachi shovel through its rent-to-purchase options, and with this equipment in hand, I just jumped up and ran."

Then the downturn arrived, and the equipment proved too expensive to keep. Hall credits Ken Thomsen, of Thomsen Timber in Olympia, for helping his company survive by leasing shovels to him when needed. Hall also contracted with other companies such as Severson Road Contractors and Carter Logging, to keep the work steady until the industry recovered.

Investing in New Equipment

The uptick in the economy has enabled Hall to reinvest in his equipment again. He took advantage of the rent-to-purchase option offered by NC Machinery to purchase a brand-new John Deere 2954 shovel, which has paid off.

"[The machine] fit our needs [and] was the right size for us," Hall says, adding that it works flawlessly, and he likes the ability to climb in and out of the cab. Crediting Jay McKown with helping him work out the financing, Hall says "I couldn't have done it without him." A John Deere 2054 processor with a Waratah 622B completes his equipment portfolio. "They're the toughest machines out there," Hall explains as his reason for selecting John Deere.

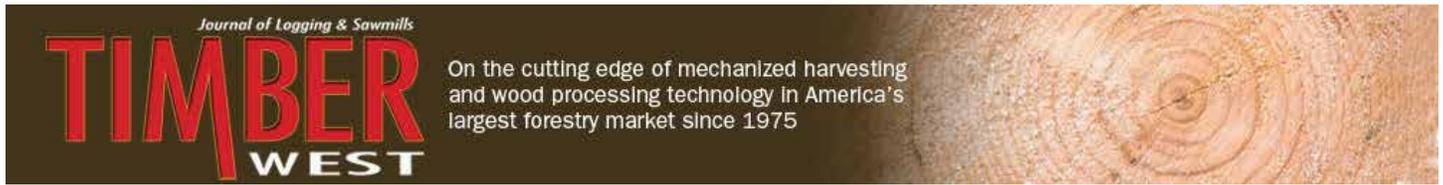
Keeping a Crew Happy

Though Pacific Logging and Processing officially has only two employees, Hall and Ben Stokes, who operates the processor, Hall regards his contractors who handle the falling and hauling as employees too. He worked with Southwest Cutting while at Weyerhaeuser, and now "they do everything of ours," he says.

Their faller Solomon Ramirez is the go-to-person whom Hall chooses for his jobs. For the hauling side, "Tony [Vanhoof of Buckley] is really good about getting us the trucks," says Hall, and Jeff is one of the regular haulers.

Supporting Hall in the administration side of the business is his longtime girlfriend Mandy who handles the permits in addition to her full-time work of delivering babies at a local hospital.

With his boots-on-the-ground experience, Hall knows what is required to retain good employees: making it as easy and simple as possible for them to do their jobs. "And thanking them for their help goes a long way," he says.



Another part of employee retention is maintaining a safe working environment, which is why Pacific Logging and Processing is a member of Washington's L&I Logger Safety Initiative. In addition to creating the required safety plans, Hall says they go a step above what they need to do in order to stay safe. "You got to be alive to log another day."

Moving to Tower Logging

Next year will see Hall transition into tower logging with the addition of a yarder, and his clientele will expand to include an industrial forestland owner; he was approached by Weyerhaeuser for work starting early next year.

Hall's dad will also come out of retirement to help out since he has tower experience. The Weyerhaeuser job will yield volumes not found on small, private landowner jobs.

Hall anticipates bringing the same attention to detail and quality as he has always done by being on site every day. And taking the larger jobs will fulfill his vision for Pacific Logging and Processing: "I always wanted to take the next step forward...[I] don't want to get stagnant."