



The Challenges of Change

Bighorn Logging Banks, Oregon

By Lindsay R. Mohlere

After nearly 35 years in the logging business, Harve Dethlefs has grown accustomed to the challenges of change that began on the first day he fired up a chainsaw as his own boss.

Dethlefs started out logging following his retirement after 20 years as a warehouse manager for Oregon electronics giant Tektronix Inc. Dethlefs followed his heritage and headed to the woods. "I grew up in a logging family," he said. "My dad felled timber, drove log trucks, ran a CAT—did a little bit of everything. Most of my other family worked in the wood products or logging industries, going back to my grandfather."

At that point, Dethlefs began cutting timber. It was his first step into entrepreneurship and a major change of direction. "When I left Tek, I had an idea I wanted to run my own outfit," Dethlefs said. Soon afterward, he teamed up with another cutter and formed a contract cutting business. "When we started, I had a couple of guys working for me and so did my partner. We did contract cutting work around the Willamette Valley. We grew to 41 cutters in a little over two years, working in the woods from the Santiam Canyon to the Columbia River."

A few years later, in 1981, Dethlefs changed yet again when he got out of the cutting business and split with his partner. That transition was the first big step toward what would become Bighorn Logging Corp. "We were just a small logging contractor. I had three or four guys working for me. We were doing high lead thinning for Longview Fibre until they started us clear cutting."

With the advent of the Longview Fibre contract, Bighorn began to grow. To handle the work, the company added employees and purchased a bigger yarder and other equipment. In the late 1980s, the company also started working for RSG Forest Products, which presented more challenges and, yet again, changed the dynamic of the company. More people. More machines.

Company Grows Quickly

In the mid 90s, Bighorn expanded further and took on Weyerhaeuser contracts in Washington State. That relationship lasted about six years until Dethlefs grew tired of driving to Washington to check on crews, and the company landed logging contracts with Willamette Industries. When Weyerhaeuser took over Willamette, Bighorn went back to work for the forest products giant; however, the association lasted only a few years. Bighorn stepped up and began logging for Stimson Lumber Company, one of the oldest continuously operating integrated wood products companies in the U.S.

By 2001, Bighorn had grown into a sizable logging operation. That year alone, the company logged 53 MMBF, running four or five sides and employing nearly 50 people.

Today, the company employs 70 people, operates seven sides, builds roads, custom cuts, and runs a fleet of eight trucks for contracts with Stimson, Boise Cascade, Columbia Vista, Cascade Hardwoods, and Stella-Jones, in addition to several private projects. Expected harvest in 2015 is 52 MMBF.



Dethlefs, an avid hunter and fisherman, arrives in the office every morning at 8:00 a.m., but the daily operations are left up to Executive Vice President Mark Standley Jr. and Timber Manager Mike Luttrell. Denise Dethlefs is Bighorn Logging's Secretary/Treasurer.

It was quite a change from one man armed with a chain saw. "The company's growth wasn't by accident," Dethlefs says. "I had a plan, but it grew a lot faster than I expected."

Machines on the Leading Edge

The demands of running four yarder and two to four ground-based sides require a solid commitment to field the best equipment available to meet company production goals. While the company's equipment list consists of several different brands, Dethlefs has his preferences.

All of Bighorn's yarders are Thunderbirds. The lineup features a TTY-90 tower, a TTY-70 tower, a 255 swing yarder, and a 6250 swing yarder. The yarders are all older machines, but with the right maintenance they've held up.

"The Thunderbirds have been very reliable. They're good machines and don't need much repair. I bought the 70 tower in 1996 for five hundred fifty thousand. Now a new yarder will cost a million four. Makes sense to keep repairing the old ones," Dethlefs says.

The tower yarders are paired with Boman Mark V and Mark VI motorized carriages, and the swing yarders employ Acme carriages.

Most of the company's nine log loaders and four dedicated processors are newer John Deeres with a couple of CAT 568s and a couple older Hitachis thrown into the mix. "We run John Deeres because we feel they are quality machines, and we get great dealer support," Dethlefs says. Waratah 622, 623, and four 624 dangle heads are the preferred processors, with one 625 mounted on a John Deere 3754.

In addition to eight hand cutters, Bighorn Logging fields a Tigercat 830 feller buncher equipped with a Quadco intermittent saw and two new 2015 Tigercat LS855 leveling shovels equipped with 5195 grapple bar saws for directional felling and bunching, which were purchased from Triad.

Filling out the Bighorn equipment stable is an assortment of John Deere machines from Papé Machinery and CAT equipment (from Peterson Cat), including a CAT 325 excavator/roadbuilder.

"Machines have come a long way in the last ten to fifteen years," says Dethlefs. "We're always trying to stay on the leading edge of the technology that allows us to see better production. It requires us to do a lot of trading for newer equipment. We probably have as good array of new equipment as any outfit in northwest Oregon."

A Solid Philosophy of People

Dethlefs credits his management experience at Tektronix interfacing with his employees as a good foundation for dealing with the challenges of running a logging operation.



“Turnover really hurts a company,” Dethlefs says. “Training an employee is not a week or two process. It takes years to be able to work in this industry and be safe enough to survive without getting all beat up. You’ve got to treat employees right so they stay with you.”

While offering top wages, major medical and dental insurance, an optional 401K program, and bonuses, Bighorn tries to provide the best benefits it can and stay competitive in the industry.

Another aspect of keeping a good crew is providing a safe working environment in an inherently dangerous business. To that end, the company has a proactive approach to safety, which is immediately evident in its use of Waratah dangle head processors instead of stroke delimiters.

“We used delimiters in the past, but we had a situation where one of our operators swung the boom around and crashed it into the cab of a yarder with the engineer sitting in it. Luckily, he saw it coming and dove to the floor. He didn’t get hurt, but ever since, we’ve used dangle heads. There’s not enough room on the landings for a 50-foot boom. It’s safer with the Waratahs,” Dethlefs explains.

In addition, Bighorn truck drivers meet every three months to review safety practices and current changes to rules and regulations. Company-wide safety meetings are held a couple of times a year to keep everyone up to date.

Dethlefs believes the real secret to success still boils down to having the right people on the job. “Employees are what really make a company,” he says. “It’s not the machines. It’s not the management. It’s the people. You can buy equipment. You can buy the vehicles. You can buy all that other stuff, but you can’t buy people.”