

Drew Logging Fills the Thinning Niche

By Andrea Watts

Preston Drew says he “just slid into the industry.” Cutting firewood in high school turned into a career path that he hasn’t been able to shake.

Forty years later, even after experiencing all the ups and downs in the industry and reinventing himself so many times to keep working, Drew does not regret his career decision. “If you can get through the bumps, it’s a great business.”

From Timber Sales to Thinning

Drew has worked a variety of jobs that include U.S. Forest Service timber sales (the first in 1973, the last in ’95) and land clearing work from 1994 until 2005 when the recession hit. He has even done production driven work for industrial timber owners. Yet what Drew kept returning to, and now defines as his niche, are thinning jobs for private, family landowners. He has worked exclusively with these property owners for the past 10 years.

“The nice thing about thinning is it pays well, though there is less production. It’s not so impacted by market shifts,” he explains. Drew prefers second thinning, large volume jobs with one MBF or better, as these jobs have the high-value logs. This type of land also has the topography best suited to the mechanized ground-based logging that Drew employs.

Most of his jobs consist of sites 20 to 40 acres in size, within a 100-mile radius of his base in Carnation, Washington. Though he describes himself as half-retired, Drew admits that if it’s a “cream puff job [one that is challenging], I’ll be salivating over it.”

During his career, he has logged as far south as Eugene, Oregon, as far north as Mt. Vernon, Washington, and west to Westport and the Olympic Peninsula’s Port Angeles. Drew even recently worked a challenging job on Whidbey Island that had 12 loads taken off the island. He also stays busy by purchasing his own sales and as a result of word-of-mouth referrals.

Northwest Natural Resources Group

One of those word-of-mouth sources is Northwest Natural Resources Group (NNRG), a nonprofit group dedicated “to promoting a sustainable, environmentally-sound economy in the forestlands of the Pacific Northwest.” Their membership consists primarily of family forest landowners and nonprofits. Many of these properties are FSC-certified through the NNRG’s certification program.

One service NNRG provides to its membership is connecting landowners with preferred contractors for forest management needs, such as loggers or sawmills. “I found out about NNRG through one of their consultant foresters whom I’ve worked with on other jobs,” says Drew.

Becoming a preferred contractor required going through a certification process, and he recalls it took a fair amount of time to complete, which he did in 2013. These jobs eliminate the work of contracting out the cruising or finding markets for the timber. Drew adds, “The value of NNRG is to send a forester out to define needs and make it a viable commercial operation.” One aspect of these types of jobs is that the landowners are passionate about their trees and want to know all the details entailed with hosting an active logging site on their properties.

In September 2015, Drew worked his second NNRG job on member Kim Weers’ property, located outside of Woodinville. The job’s purpose was to improve forest health, thin freeze-damaged western hemlock, and remove Douglas fir that was infected with laminated root rot. Weers is very much like Drew’s previous clients, who live amongst their trees and are “interested in all the little details.” As one of the job requirements, she requested there be minor disturbance around the house and that her groomed trails not be damaged, if possible. Drew takes these requests in stride and doesn’t mind the additional safeguards he must implement, saying “The main goal is to leave the property in as pristine condition as possible.”

Leaning on His Cutters

For the precision cutting needed for these types of thinning operations, Preston depends upon his cutters, Bill Mercer and Jared Smith. "I've been on the saw for 41 years, started when I was 16," Mercer says, and he has the work experience to back him up. He has worked exclusively in the Pacific Northwest, beginning in Alaska and working in Idaho, California, Oregon, and Washington.

Fourteen years ago, Mercer left Idaho for Washington and joined Preston's crew in 2005. "It's all about fun and games. If you can't have fun, it's not worth it," All joking aside, Mercer is quick to say, "We [he and Preston] work really well together. We're both very cautious."

As a demonstration of their cautious approach to cutting, they'll bring in a shovel to push the trees if they can't be fallen safely, or they will take out leave trees to safely fall the flagged trees. Because of this cautious approach, the consulting foresters and landowners respect their decisions.

In addition to the felling and yarding challenges, they must routinely work around houses, outbuildings, and trails that normally aren't found on typical logging jobs. While Mercer describes these types of thinning operations as "nail-biting jobs," he adds, "The older I get, the more I enjoy these jobs, though they are twice as dangerous." On clearcut operations he says most cutters get complacent; on this type of thinning, "it makes a person start thinking again, and it actually rejuvenates a guy's mind."

Equipment for the Job

Two pieces of Drew's four-piece equipment portfolio are in use on the Woodinville job. He has had the John Deere 548B grapple skidder for four years.

"I really like it," Drew says, adding that he was so impressed with his first John Deere, "I went out and bought their stock."

Paired with the skidder is a Daewoo 290LL purchased in 2007. The next item he expects to purchase will be a D4 Cat with a grapple to supplement the skidder. His other shovel is a Doosan 225 that is configured with a Keto processor head. Drew says he's very happy with the versatility of the machine. He uses the machine on the landing for processing and for falling timber up to 20-inch DBH. The machine can also process at the stump when necessary.

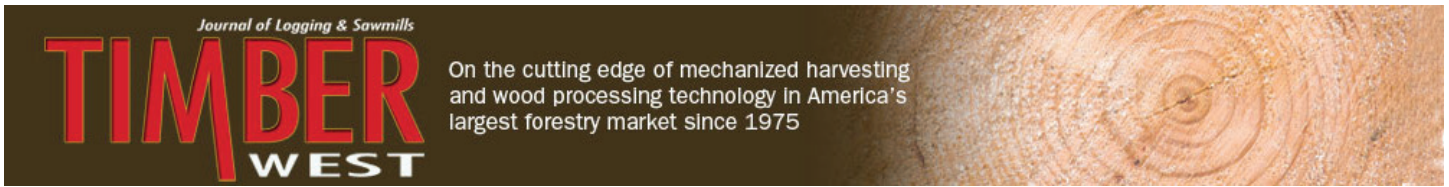
In addition to cutting, Mercer and Smith also operate the company's Timberjack 2628 feller buncher. Drew credits Smith as being particularly skillful at laying out the angles when machine falling and yarding tree length inside constricted thinning units. This is critical to successfully protecting the residual stand. The Timberjack with a Timbco bar saw can handle stems up to 30 inches.

For all his equipment purchases, Drew depends on Rich Lennox of Cascade Trader. Since the 80s, Drew has purchased seven machines through Lennox, whom he regards as "a first-class guy" who has earned his loyalty. To save on the expense and time of maintaining his own trucks, Drew contracts Luke Bartholomew Trucking based out of North Bend for his hauling needs.

Finishing up

Drew doesn't consider a job complete even after the last of the timber is hauled out. He has a clean-up punch list, which includes cleaning the landings and smoothing the skid trails. "The main thing is to make the landowner happy," Drew says. And hearing the landowner's compliments of a job well done makes this type of job even more satisfying, he adds.

Drew is proud of his approach to performing the job well. He has been audited by SFI and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources and never had a problem. In fact, he proudly shares that when working a job in an area classified as forested wetland, he left behind quite a few trees in an effort to reduce damaging the soil. When a forester visited the site, Drew was told he could have taken out more trees. In keeping with his approach to safety, Drew is a member of



Washington State's L&I Logger Safety Initiative and hopes to move to Tier 3 in the near future.

Behind the scenes of Drew Logging are Drew's family members who also have a hand in keeping the operation running. His wife Jeanne balances the books, and Jenine, one of his three daughters, maintains the website.

Drew anticipates retiring in 2018 and wants to see his company transition to the next generation. As he approaches 50 years in the business, Drew is certain about one thing: "I started in timber, and I want to end in timber."