From Firewood to Thinning Operations

Grasseth and Sons Logging may have started small, but now they harvest for large operations like RS & G, Green Diamond, and Stimpson

By Jeff Mullins

Near Tillamook, Ore., the sleet mercilessly pelts Sandy Grasseth as he disconnects turns, wields a chainsaw, and repairs chokers on the narrow strip of road below a swing yader perched on the steep face of Cedar Butte. This is standard fare for a young buck, but Sandy is 64 years old. “I haven’t progressed very far in 40 years,” says Sandy (founder of Grasseth and Sons Logging), pointing to his two sons merchandising logs from within enclosed cabs.

From Firewood to Six Million Board Feet

Based in Nehalem, Ore., Grasseth and Sons Logging began in 1990 when Tom Grasseth bought into his father’s operation. Sandy had been salvaging logs and cedar bolts since the 1960s. Purchasing salvage rights after harvest crews, recovering blowdowns and fire-damaged fiber, Sandy would “clean up” to glean firewood for his own mill and recover as many marketable logs as he could. He pioneered the use of helicopters for transporting cedar bolts to landings in large cargo nets, and he instilled in his children an appetite for hard work.

“When I partnered with dad, we were a 7-day-a-week firewood business with a pickup and a piece of haywire; any logs to sell was icing on the cake,” says Tom. A Clark 666 skidder and a D6 Cat were added later. A reputation built on word-of-mouth advertising landed Grasseth a contract to conduct thinning operations for a major timberland holder in 1992. For this job, a SJ4 Skagit tower and a well used, but reliable, Link-Belt 3400 shovel were added. By the mid 1990s, younger brother Ron had joined the partnership.

Today Grasseth and Sons Logging harvests approximately 6 mmbf a year for mills like RS & G, Green Diamond, and Stimpson on state and private lands. They log during the week and process firewood on weekends. Hired trucks move equipment and transport logs to mills, and contract cutters do falling for the Grasseths.

Quick and Limber

Valued for mobility and quick setup, a Thunderbird TSY 6140 swing yader is fast and efficient for pulling full length stems in relatively small turns.

Chaser and founder of the Grasseth and Sons Logging, Sandy Grasseth

Ron’s Link-Belt 290LX secures turns at the road’s steep edge as they are disconnected from the ACME 20 carriage.

A Waratah 624 dangle head on a Link-Belt 330LX carriage merchandizes logs on the narrow road. Tom uses a dual drum equipped Caterpillar EL300 shovel as a clean up machine that is also available for yoder logging with an ACME 10 carriage when needed. Grasseth’s TMY 45 can be used for bigger tower jobs, and a Maki carriage is available as a spare.

After the harvesting is done, Grasseth frequently bids for firewood salvage rights. At their equipment yard, the original Link-Belt 3400 positions logs where chainsaws and a hydraulic
splitter churn out two cords each weekend.

“We’re not trying to grow the firewood end of the company but only service our faithful customers who gave us a start,” says Tom. The partners have considered buying a firewood processor but are not convinced the cost is justifiable. “After all, dad still considers cutting firewood a vacation,” adds Tom.

**Shovel Logging**
Grasseth’s shovel side produces 20 or more loads a day and typically consists of two men, two shovels, and a processor. Tom and Ron Grasseth alternate decking stems with Link-Belt 240LX and 290LX shovels, processing logs with a 750 Log Max dangle head on the Link-Belt 2800 carriage, and loading trucks.

“Ron can do twice as much with a shovel than anyone else, without sacrificing safety or damaging anything,” says Tom. Although unwilling to boast, Ron admits that he loves running the equipment and likes to go fast.

**Finding the Right Crew**
Grasseth attempts to hire and retain employees who share the company’s work ethic. “Logging is a tough job. It is increasingly difficult to find people who are not afraid to work,” says Sandy. Tom says the company provides top pay, good benefits, a safe workplace, and steady employment to attract good employees. The owners labor beside their six employees and set an example by working hard themselves. “We want to give all our employees an opportunity to shine, and we try to train them to do all the jobs. This encourages them and is a good business practice.”

Ron Grasseth operates the LinkBelt 290LX, while his brother Tom Grasseth operates the LinkBelt 330LX with 624 Waratah dangle head.

Tom adds, “As co-owners we work together and also seek input from our employees.” At the end of the day, the crew members discuss the high and low points, identify concerns, and decide how the operation can be more productive and safe. Sandy, Tom, and Ron make management decisions together by unanimous agreement including equipment purchases and bidding jobs.

When evaluating jobs for bid, Sandy and Tom assess the tower side work, and Ron evaluates how their Link-Belts can be most productive on the shovel side. Their ideal job is a 50/50 split between shovel and tower logging that allows both sides to be physically close together.

“If we’re close together, a breakdown won’t shut down either side,” says Tom. “We can easily shuffle equipment to keep things going.” But frequently, there is more tower side work and it’s necessary for the sides to work at different locations.

**Staying in the Black**
An experienced bookkeeper keeps the pencil sharp and provides bottom line information necessary to be competitive in bidding without going in the hole. Tom says, “Margins are tight,
and bidding competition is stiff. We try to do the best job we can, and sometimes we lose a bid to someone who is a little lower, but we will not sacrifice quality or safety to get work or increase profits.”

And quality is important to the company. Grasseth & Sons Logging was recognized by the Oregon State regional forest practices committee in 2001 for exceeding requirements for protecting the riparian zone and ensuring slope stability during a harvest in the Minich Creek drainage.

**Facing the Future**
Although Grasseth owns most of their equipment, financing new equipment is part of the strategy to minimize tax burdens. Shovels and processors are replaced about every 6,000 hours while they still have a high resale value. Tom says they are considering buying a slightly bigger swing yarder to increase productivity but will keep the 6140 for shorter pulls.

Sandy recently turned over full ownership to his sons, but Tom contends, “Dad continues to be a major decision maker in the company, and I am sure his love for work will keep him going until the day he drops.”