



Adapting to Work

Milner Brothers Logging Inc. Alter Operations to Make It Work

By Jeff Mullins

Nestled between the emerald green Clark Fork River and a steep face of national forest near Thompson Falls, Mont., Milner Brothers Logging recently completed a “fuel reduction” project on 500 acres of nearly flat private land in close proximity to 400 homes.

To accomplish the goals of the project (funded in part by federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dollars disbursed through Montana’s “Jump Start” grant) partners Patrick and Larry Milner altered their mode of operation and purchased additional equipment. The company’s willingness to adapt machines and methods to fit available work has been an essential element of their success and profitability for over 15 years.

Labor Intensive

After ten years of logging steadily for a large timber company, Milner Brothers were “laid off” in December 2008 and were without work for eight months. Absent employment, with no prospects for work, they dipped into resources set aside for future equipment purposes. Eventually they were awarded the fuel reduction project grant and decided that prudence dictated efficiency and methods to put the most money in their pockets as possible.

Patrick Milner says, “Two men and a fully mechanized operation could have completed the work in as little as three months, but with that method, most of the money would have been expended in operating costs. The job would soon have been done, but with no other work available, then what would we do? We chose a more labor intensive approach to keep six men employed for as long as 16 months.”

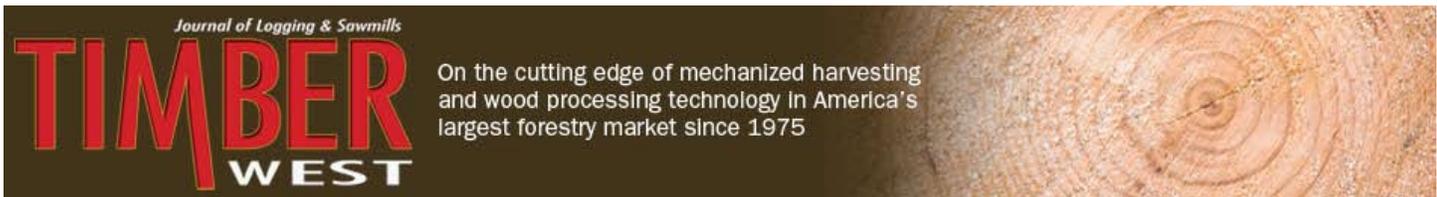
The first step was planning and mapping the entire project using GPS coordinates to designate skid trail and landing locations to maximize efficiency while minimizing ground disturbance — an important goal of the project.

Merchantable stems, including saw logs, pulp, and firewood were then hand felled and yarded by line skidder to landings where a Kobelco SK220 log loader stripped off as many branches as possible before laying out stems for hand processing. The loader then sorted and decked logs and stacked slash for conversion to hog fuel by a hired portable chipper. Dead stems with little weight were segregated for sale in log truck loads of firewood since it would not be cost-effective to ship them as pulp.

With merchantable stems removed, Patrick Milner wielded a new Stihl MS 390 saw with a long bar to clip the stems of any unwanted woody material with diameters of more than a quarter inch.

“This isn’t really logging, but it is better than standing in the bread line,” says Patrick.

As the brush was cut, Patrick’s son, Eric, piled it onto existing skid trails for removal with a brush grapple equipped Caterpillar 236B skid steer purchased specifically for this job.



Upon project completion, native species of appropriately spaced Douglas Fir, Western Larch, and Ponderosa Pine remain with select scattered areas (one half to one acre in size) purposely left untouched for wildlife habitat. In addition to the grant monies, Milner Brothers Logging sells the logs and hog fuel as partial payment for the work, and the landowners get a healthy stand of fire resistant trees without cost to them. Exposure to fire danger for adjacent homes and forestlands is greatly reduced.

Adapting and Flexing

Flexibility in operations and adapting methodologies have characterized Milner Brothers Logging from the beginning. The company began when the two brothers decided a company of their own could improve efficiency in logging operations and put more money in their pockets.

After a decade of felling and bucking for a logging contractor, Patrick Milner bought a used John Deere 350 dozer with a winch and began “logging on the side” with the help of brother Larry. After six months, the brothers devoted themselves full time to the fledgling company that built on an already established reputation for precision hand felling timber.

Additional equipment was slowly added to increase productivity and to meet the demands of various private landowner projects and occasional subcontracts they landed, including three 540 John Deere skidders and a Case 850 dozer, all line machines.

In 1998, contact with a Plum Creek forester who was familiar with the Milners’ skill in felling big wood with minimum breakage led to a ten year relationship of negotiated contracts to harvest timber in stream management zones (SMZ) and places that were beyond the reach of contractors with mechanized equipment.

To increase the ability to remove trees near streams with minimal ground impact, a Koehring 6625 log yarder-loader equipped with dual winches was purchased. This “yoder-exscaliner” also eliminated the need to use self loading trucks to haul the logs they produce, saving as much as \$75 for each load shipped.

Additionally, the Koehring “mobile tower” allowed ridge line harvesting where establishing roads was undesirable, broadening the spectrum of services they could provide. When a need arose to use the exscaliner high on a ridge and load logs at another location, they added a Kobelco 220 log loader. Upon securing the fuel reduction job, they purchased a Caterpillar skid steer with the brush grapple to provide an efficient way to gather small slash and assemble it at centralized locations for chipping/grinding.

Milner Brothers willingness to add equipment and modify methods has proved advantageous to securing work for the company.

Mobility Means More Work

Milner Brothers previously relied on others to transport their equipment to job sites. When schedule conflicts resulted in time and production losses, they knew something needed to change. The problem was solved with the purchase of a 1986 Freightliner flatbed truck with beaver tail and ramps capable of transporting all their equipment except the log loaders.

Being able to easily, inexpensively, and quickly move most of their equipment not only increased flexibility and production, it also allowed the company to accept smaller jobs that would be excluded if they had to hire a lowboy to transport



all their equipment. Patrick says that as a result, “We can profitably harvest patches with as few as twenty loads of logs and net more money for both us and the timber owner.”

The Milner brothers agree it is hard to guess what the future will hold. They expect to put their name on Plum Creek’s competitive bidding list and trust that their mobility, flexibility, and adaptability will serve them well into the future as it has in the past.