

Taking on Alaska

R&R King Logging finds opportunity in Alaska

By Robert Bruce

It takes more than luck to keep a logging company running successfully for four generations, particularly considering the rough economy we've had to deal with in recent years. For R&R King Logging out of Florence, Ore., the secret has been knowing how to best incorporate the talents of each new generation while still holding true to the principles the company was founded on.

Nearly 100 years ago, Bob King's grandfather started logging in the Monmouth area using horses. By the time Bob's father and uncle bought into the business in the early 1950s and changed the name to King Brothers Logging, Grandpa King's horse-drawn methods had given way to mechanically powered high-lead logging.

When Bob graduated from college in the late 1960s, he went to work for his father. It was also around that time that the company had the opportunity to move operations to the Oregon coast around the Mapleton-Swisshome area and buy out the logging operations of a local mill, Erskine Lumber Company.

Expanding the Business

Bob's degree was in business with a focus on taxes and accounting, which worked out well since according to Bob, his father "didn't want anything to do with the business end. He wanted to be out there on a loader, and he was very happy to let his son take on all the management headaches."

Being a real business meant expanding the company in order to be able to bring in more business and hopefully even out the inevitable ups and downs of logging.

"My dad never really wanted to expand," he says, "but when he retired, it was right around when the recession hit in the 1980s, and we didn't turn a wheel for a full year. I took over management of the company and decided we had to go out and solicit jobs from other companies."

At first growing the company was fairly easy, at least from a personnel standpoint, since as he explains, "back in the early days we had key people that had the same production mentality that I did, and they understood what I wanted."

Handling Today's Competitive Industry

Even today he continues to promote from within. He relies heavily on his son-in-law Dan Waggoner to help manage day-to-day operations and, in particular, to help grow the company in new directions.

"It's a very competitive business," says Bob. "Not only do you have to know how to log, you have to know what the projections are and how accurate they are because you base your bids on that."



“We don’t paint ourselves into a corner on jobs because I know when we can and can’t do a particular job. The problem today is the loggers are expected to have state-of-the-art equipment, maintain high jobsite safety, log environmentally correctly, protect the land, be fire conscious, and go into debt to buy all this equipment.”

Of course if you are a contract logger these days, typically every job is a bid job and there are no guarantees of future work. “You could be a bridesmaid on eight out of nine jobs and not be able to make your payments,” he says. “The mills expect you to go into debt, but they’re not willing to give you a long-term contract so you know you’re safe.”

Also complicating the picture is the issue of federal forest lands being placed off-limits to logging — a subject Bob and his wife Kay are passionately against and about which they frequently speak in public forums and lobby against to members of Congress.

“Clearcut is a dirty word,” he says, “but here in the Pacific Northwest we grow Douglas Fir — the most usable, most structural strength, best wood you can possibly grow. But Douglas Fir is not shade-tolerant, which means you have to clearcut in order to plant new Doug Fir. They have to have the sun to grow.”

Running the Right Equipment

R&R King Logging has an extensive list of equipment that includes three TMY 70 yarders, a TMY 50 yarder, and a 137 Washington yarder — all of which use Boman skycars. “We would not use any other kind,” he says.

For log loaders they run a Komatsu 220, Cat 330, Linkbelt 290, Hitachi 270, and a John Deere 892. They have three processors — a Komatsu with a Denharco Stroke delimeter, a Linkbelt 290 with Waratah dangle head, and a Linkbelt 240 with a 3348 Pierce delimeter.

They also have a number of dozers and skidders including Terex 8220s and 8230s, Cat D7s and D8s, and a Komatsu D85.

Sealaska Steps In

About five years ago, a unique opportunity presented itself — a rather unusual opportunity at that.

“We were not specifically looking out of state for work,” he explains, “but in 2007, out of the blue, we got a call from a company in Alaska. They had heard about us and they wanted to talk.”

The company was Sealaska, a Native corporation, and they were looking for a logger.

“It was the first of December. The mills were talking about taking two weeks off for Christmas, and we’d just come through a week of snow so we were looking at three weeks without turning a wheel. They wanted to know if we would be interested in coming up there to take a look. They said they had five to seven years of logging.”

“I told Danny, ‘I don’t know; I’m 55 years old. I don’t think we should be going to Alaska.’” Dan however, who had been to Alaska many times before on fishing trips and loved the place, recommended they at least see what the job looked like.



They made the trip and liked what they saw. Despite the considerable challenges involved in moving men, equipment, supplies, and support infrastructure from the coast of Oregon to a completely uninhabited, mountainous island off the Alaskan coast, it proved to be a perfect fit for the company.

“It’s not that we were dissatisfied in any way with what we had down here in Oregon,” he stresses. “It was purely a market-driven situation.”

In fact Bob’s business and accounting background was key to making sure it all worked out on paper before they made such a huge commitment.

Alaska Challenges

The expense in logging in Alaska — particularly where this particular job is located — is the isolation factor. The cost is severe for moving even simple and small (but important) items from the Lower 48 to where they are needed. “A \$47 fuel line costs us \$247 to get it there,” he says.

“I don’t care what kind of a pencil you put to it, it’s always more than you think,” he notes. “We have to put everything on flatbeds, drive it up the freeway, put it on a barge, then wait three days for it to make it to the job site. We had to build a state-approved camp — we put the barge up to the edge of the shore, dropped the ramp, and started scratching out a road system.”

Ironically, because of the terrain on the Alaskan island, the crews are falling back to some of his father’s and grandfather’s old school techniques.

“It’s called high lead downhill logging because you can’t build roads on top,” he explains. “The timber lies around the edges and you’ve got the ocean below that, so you’ve got to log these mid-slopes. Sometimes you can hang a skyline across a drainage, mid-slope to mid-slope, and use skycars; but a lot of times you can only put a road up the bottom and log downhill. Or log down to the ocean and pull them up by using lift trees and the old style rider block and high lead logging.”

Another twist is that instead of loading the logs onto trucks that go to a local mill, all the logs they produce are tied together into rafts and floated out to ships where they are loaded for export to China, Korea, and Japan.

“If I didn’t have a fourth generation coming along who was so interested in and capable of spearheading the expansion to Alaska, we never would have gone there,” he says. “It’s been a lot of work but it’s also been exhilarating. We’re going on our third year working for Sealaska, and so far it’s been a great relationship.”