

Flat to Steep Slope Logging

R.L. Smith offers generations of expertise in harvesting Pacific Northwest trees

By Chelan David

Logging runs in Roger Smith's blood. Both of his grandfathers were loggers. So are his brothers and uncles.

When Smith graduated from high school in 1980, the decision to follow in



Brothers Guy Smith (left) and Roger Smith (right) stand in front of the John Deere 3554. Guy operates the 3544 operator, while owner Roger spends a bulk of his time running the company, R.L. Smith Logging operates primarily in Grays Harbor County, Wash.

his family's footsteps was an easy one. "I enjoyed the hard work and working outside," he relates. "The money was also a draw, as I started out at \$14/hour, which was a lot of money in 1980."

Community Connection

Smith eagerly immersed himself in the logging industry, learning the tricks of the trade for over a decade before starting R.L. Smith Logging, Inc. in 1991. Based in Olympia, Wash., the logging company operates primarily in Grays Harbor County, with some work in Pacific and Lewis Counties.

Employing 23 people, the company is large enough to handle jobs for big timber companies and nimble enough to work with small landowners. "The size of our operation is big enough to handle a large landowner job. We can get in and out quickly and produce the wood in volumes. Or, we are diversified enough to do a small job with one or two machines," says Smith.

Investing in Steep Slopes

Such undertakings as cutting, yarding, processing, loading, and hauling are performed in areas with 70 percent steeper tower ground over 30 percent grades. Significant investments have been made in equipment designed to cover both steep terrain and flat terrain.

Smith currently has more than a dozen machines at his disposal, including a 1996 Hitachi 300 with Waratah 624, 2002 Madill 172 yarder, 2004 Komatsu 300 with Yoder package, 2005 Grapple Skidder 525B, 2006 Hitachi 350 logging shovel, 2006 Tigercat Feller Buncher 870C, and 2006 Peterbilt Log Truck. In addition, a 2001 Komatsu loading shovel, 2006 John Deere 3554 with Waratah, 1998 Komatsu with Denharco DT3500, 2003 Peterbuilt Log Truck, and 1998 Kenworth Log Truck are at the company's disposal.

Cautious Growth

Growth has been steady, but best measured in "baby steps" as Smith is cautious about expanding too quickly. One of his biggest challenges is finding and keeping skilled workers. For each piece of new equipment that is purchased, suitable personnel must be found to run the machines.

Measures such as offering health care for employees and their families, retirement plans, vacations, and holidays have limited employee turnover. In fact, six of Smith's skilled operators have been with him for over 10 years.

While the generous benefits have led to a stable workforce, Smith acknowledges that with today's tight margins, such expenses directly affect the bottom line.

Fluctuating fuel prices also have an impact. Each day, R.L. Smith Logging uses approximately 600 gallons. "The business is compensated for trucking with a fuel surcharge," explains Smith. "For the equipment though, when you bid a large job that takes three months to log — and fuel jumps up over a dollar a gallon — that can affect the bottom line."

Moving to Tree Length

The biggest transition Smith has witnessed, from an industry standpoint, is going from fell and bucked timber to tree length.

"We've been tree length logging for the past 15 years. With that came the onset of the stroke delimiters and then danglehead processors," he says. "Also, a lot of the units are smaller acreage-wise now to comply with the rules."

When the wood started getting smaller, Smith adapted by tree lengthening with his Tigercat 870C Feller Buncher on steeper slopes of up to 45 percent. Two Waratah 624 processors and a stroker delimeter are utilized for such projects.

When to Purchase

The primary factor Smith looks at when purchasing a new piece of equipment is longevity of components. Each machine is expected to last at least 20,000 hours. When a machine does

break down, the overwhelming majority of the time — 95 percent — mechanic work is performed in-house rather than by the dealer.

Currently Smith has two machines with over 20,000 hours and another one that is getting close. In addition to longevity, ease of maintenance, operator comfort, productivity, and fuel usage are also important considerations when purchasing a machine.

Swing Machine

Two years ago, Smith purchased a 2006 John Deere 3554 Swing Machine with a rear entry cab — the logging company's first rear entry cab.

"We chose to purchase a John Deere 3554 Swing Machine because it gave us the option to take the Waratah head off and shovel log," Smith says. "We also like the stability of the John Deere 3554 with the Waratah. I can't think of a better machine to run the Waratah 624." He adds that with all of the Waratah computer items mounted in the cab, it's been nice to have the extra space that the rear entry cab provides.

Smith's brother, Guy, who operates the John Deere 3554, has been impressed with its visibility. The cab's floor has windows, which improves the view of the track area. Other special features include illuminated gauges and an ergonomic operator's seat with 360-degree visibility.

So far, the John Deere 3554 has lived up to expectations — operating reliably under strenuous conditions.

"The rigors the machine is put



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through on a daily basis are pretty much full-out for 10-11 hours each day," says Smith. "We've had it two years, and it has 5,000 hours on it without a major problem."

Year-Round Harvesting

R.L. Smith Logging stays productive year-round by working for large timber companies that have set volumes produced every year. The company has worked with Weyerhaeuser for over 17 years and Port Blakely for the past three years.

The only scheduled downtime is during Thanksgiving and Christmas, moments Smith cherishes spending with Carmen, his wife of 27 years, and their two children.

Smith relies on his family to provide support when needed. He also expects his equipment to be dependable. "It is very important to have equipment that I can rely on," he says. "When you are down, you aren't making money."

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