

# It's a Struggle

## Veteran swamp logger deals with rising costs, stagnant markets.

By Jennifer McCary



### JACKSONVILLE, NC

For twenty years, third generation Bobby Goodson, owner of Goodson All Terrain Logging, has logged mostly hardwood bottoms of eastern North Carolina. Initially, he ran a low ground pressure operation and converted to shovel logging about 12 years ago. The logger proudly notes that the company has grown every year. Some years that growth was razor thin, but it never went backwards. This year isn't shaping up that way.

When SLT visited the jobsite, the crew was diligently working to retrieve felled timber on a deep bottomland tract, which would soon be underwater. Heavy rains on the heels of an extended drought had accumulated too much water too fast, so the reservoir had opened the locks to release the excess downstream. Goodson's job was in its path. By the time SLT's visit ended, water had covered the truck access road at the landing.

The crew would have to move off, at a cost of roughly \$4,200, then move back, another \$4,200, to clean up the tract later. That's the kind of unpredictable expenses that etch worry lines across the brow of lifelong woodsmen like Goodson.

Those lines have deepened considerably this year with the added pressure of rising fuel costs and continued market curtailment in the lumber and panel segments. His fuel bill alone has topped \$20,000 a month for on and off road fuel. And for the first time, logging is subsidizing the trucking operations.

According to Goodson, the state's logging ranks have thinned significantly in the last couple of years, particularly since the recent Equipment Finance LLC scandal surfaced. Fraudulent and deceptive practices committed by previous EFI managers created a \$200 million loss for the finance company and involved tons of forestry iron. In the last couple of months, EFI has started repossessing defaulted machines.

Though not directly impacted, Goodson says the situation made it tough to compete with operators who weren't making their payments or were paying bare minimums and could therefore survive on low quotas and low logging rates. He is aware of eight companies that had equipment repossessed in recent weeks further intensifying the ongoing logger shortage, the extent of which won't be known until the markets turn around.



Like everyone, Goodson is focused on curbing costs and capturing all available efficiencies to survive these challenging times. He has eliminated machine and truck idle time, minimized skid distances though that is hard to do in shovel logging, and tried to stay close to his primary mill to reduce haul distances.

He feels blessed to have a skilled and highly productive crew, most of them long-term employees with close to 10 years' tenure and a core group that has been together about 18 years. A couple even predates the company's founding, having worked for his dad, Bobby Goodson, Sr.

His dad exited the logging business in 1989 when his entire job was burned out while he was working in the Green Swamp. According to the son, somebody went in and pulled all the tractors around the fuel truck, which had been refilled that day, locked the valve down and struck a match to it. The fire was so hot it melted the cylinders on the boom, which hung down like ropes, Goodson says. A week later, the air around the charred remains was still 10 or 15 degrees hotter than the outside air. After that, his dad turned his full attention to his rock quarry business.

Goodson's son Justin has continued the family's logging tradition, joining his father's crew several years back. Justin manages the company's trucking and runs one of the loaders. Crew members include Gurlly Hicks, David Mueller, Abraham

Parra and his nephew Jose Parra, and brothers Simitrio and Victor Ruiz. Truck drivers are Gary Foy, Oscar Miller and Joe Nagy.

“Stumper” operator, Simitrio Ruiz, a 22-year employee of the Goodson family, is considered the key man on the crew because everything hinges on how he sets up the job. “You’ve got to have key people in key places,” the owner says. “It’s exactly like a football team. Everybody has to work together. If one person doesn’t do his job right, it affects everything.”

Before Ruiz starts cutting, he studies maps and aerial photos provided by the company’s wood dealer, Corbitt Packaging of Wilmington, NC, to layout the mats for the skidders as well as the haul roads.

“It’s critical to know where everything is when you’re shovel logging,” states Goodson, who also subscribes to Google Earth. It gives him a good birds eye view of a tract, though he has discovered, it is not necessarily a real-time view. “If you just go in and start cutting and pulling wood out, you won’t be able to get to the wood behind that.”

Ruiz typically cuts at least five strips to the back of the block, working down and back twice, before the first wood can be pulled out. Any less and there wouldn’t be enough logs to make mats for the skidders to ride on, Goodson explains. Ruiz’ brother, Victor, follows with the shovel to build the mats and feed the skidders. Unless it is a long drag, the crew normally operates one bogie skidder and a clambunk. On really short pulls, they switch to two bogies.

Production averages 85 loads per week and has topped 100 when everything is going right and the mills are taking wood.



## Loyalty Earned

Goodson’s equipment stable is pure Tigercat—a loyalty the manufacturer earned in the late '90s when Goodson bought his first Tigercat skidders. At the time, the former John Deere man was having problems with axles breaking, which he believed to be a design flaw. After seeing the 630 at the Atlanta Expo, he elected to give it a try. It broke an axle with 400 machine hours

on it. Tigercat sent Goodson a skidder to use while they figured out how to strengthen his machine. When he got it back, they told him to keep the loaner a while longer to make sure they had fixed his problem. He had no more axle problems; the loaner was returned; and the logger was converted.

"There is not a tractor out here with less than 8,000 hours, some up to 16,000 hours, and I've never welded on a chassis," the logger states, motioning toward the swamp. "If I had to point to a downside, it's the weight of the tractor. But in shovel logging we make a road for them anyway, so that doesn't bother us."

A.G. Lassiter Equipment, Washington, NC, is Goodson's dealer. Machines include two '01 bogie axle 635C grapple skidders; '98 clambunk 630C skidder; '00 245 track loader; '03 250 track loader; '01 860C feller-buncher and '03 860 shovel. Two CTR ground saws and a backup '98 model 630C skidder complete the lineup.

The logger had Tigercat convert one of his 630 grapples to a clambunk several years. According to Justin, that machine is a "go-getter" capable of hauling three times as much wood as the bogies. When they first got it, he recalls, they were cutting all truck size cypress trees. From one clambunk drag, the loader man was able to load an entire truck and had four stems left over. "The wood is more balanced because it's bunched up high over the cab and there's very little dragging," he adds.

Skidders ride on 30.5 in. dual Generals or Firestones on the front axle. Bogies are outfitted with 60 in. Primex tires. Tires are supplied by Colony Tires in New Bern and Moe's Tire Service, Wilmington.

The crew handles daily machine maintenance and minor repairs. Father and son take care of most machine repairs at a 40x60 ft. shop, the company shares with his brother Mike, whom he jokingly tags a 'tennis shoe logger' because he works mostly on the hills in pine timber. Justin is a trained diesel mechanic and Goodson does all the welding. Large jobs such as rebuilding motors or rear ends are outsourced to a local mechanic. Warranty work is handled by the dealer.

The logger contracts with Corbett Packaging, which owns several sawmills and is a large landowner in eastern North Carolina. Gum logs are delivered to their facility in Wilmington. Pulpwood logs go to International Paper in Riegelwood. Turnbull Lumber Co., Elizabethtown, receives cypress sawlogs and cypress pulpwood goes to a variety of outlets, as available.

## Trucking

Goodson got into trucking to ensure that he would always have

trucks available and to protect his company's liability exposure. He cites a recent lawsuit brought against a fellow logger when a contract truck was hit by another vehicle as he was backing into the logger's landing.

"I decided if I've got to be responsible for every John Doe that pulls off of my deck, I want to have a say in what he's driving," Goodson states.

Company trucks include a '95 Mack and two '07 Kenworth W900s. Justin also owns three Kenworths which haul for the company. Goodson has always run Mack trucks and felt that was all a driver needed, until he climbed into a Kenworth. He elected to go with Kenworths to promote driver retention. Cooper Kenworth in Wilmington supplied these rigs.

Together the Goodsons own 11 log trailers which include mostly White models plus a few Pitts and Evans units. The latest purchase was four Pitts Ultra Loads which weigh 8,600 lbs., allowing the logger to add two tons to his payload; averaging 26.5 to 27 tons.

The logger says weight regulations haven't been a problem though DOT offers no leniency. He recalls an incident when he was ticketed for hauling the ground saw on the lowboy with the loader. Even though the truck weighed less than the permitted limit, the inspector



determined it was two separate pieces of equipment since they were different colors and disallowed the permit. The citation cost him \$9,800.

The biggest trucking expense though is fuel, which is now running close to 50% of what the trucks bring in. Normal rule of thumb, he notes, is that fuel costs run 33%; drivers 30% and the rest goes to truck payment and upkeep.

The logger shakes his head and laughs. "I never intended to make money with trucking; I just didn't think I was going to lose as much money as I have!"

Goodson is one of the charter members of the recently formed North Carolina Assn. of Professional Loggers and is hopeful the young organization will provide loggers a much needed voice in Raleigh and Washington D.C. "There are so many things affecting you that you've got to have the right people in the right places to lobby for you. They come up with some crazy laws sometimes." Another benefit he would like to see the group to provide in the future is the ability to do power buying of supplies such as tires, which would help loggers control their costs.

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