

Cashing In

Randy Mickey deploys a processor head to boost utilization, up log yield and speed production.

By Jennifer McCary

HAMLET, NC

In recent years Randy Mickey has seen significant changes in his woods, including new forestland owners and changing timber management objectives, which led to some adjustments on his logging operation.

R. R. Mickey Logging Inc. converted to thinning six years ago when Bowater foresters started doing fewer clear-cuts and more thinning prescriptions on its pine plantations. Since then, that land has changed owners and is now intensively managed through Timber Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs). Mickey's operation was among the first in the area to convert to full-time thinnings. He estimates he has spent about 75% of the last three years working on some of these lands.

The company's six-man crew works in timber stands that are typically a little older than most first thinnings, so there are almost always some sawlogs in the mix. Last November, Mickey took delivery of a Tigercat 250 tracked carrier with a Tigercat 650 WoodKing processor head supplied by Tidewater Equipment in Polkton, NC. His primary goal was to speed up and improve the merchandising process.



"We were able to keep wood on the ground but it was backing up at the loader," states the veteran logger of 24 years. "I thought a processor would help speed that up, which it has. And it has made a big difference with this smaller wood. (It's difficult) when you are sitting up there looking at the same wood everyday and they don't vary more than two or three inches." The machine has boosted production an estimated 22%, which works out to about two extra loads a day. Weekly first thinning volumes average 1,300 to 1,400 tons on a 45-hour week.

Equally important is the logger's ability to capture maximum value from every log. "You're guaranteed that your diameters are going to be right and your lengths are going to be right," explains Tidewater sales rep Mack McLaurin. "From the landowner and wood buyer's perspective this machine is going to maximize his return. Every inch of sawlog that's there is going to be merchandized. That gives Randy an advantage because no other loggers are doing that in this area."

Improved utilization has increased log yield approximately 7-10%.

The Application

Initially, the logger demoed a Deere and Waratah duo, which sold him on the processor concept. He also

talked with Canal Wood LLC, his wood dealer of 15+ years. One of their landowners with previous CTL experience didn't want them to use a processor on their timberlands. Upon investigation, Mickey learned the reason was that CTL had not proven productive enough due to a thick underbrush and tangle of vines in the plantation wood. Those objections quickly disappeared once they understood Mickey would not be felling with the processor. And Mickey notes the processor does an excellent job of cleaning up the wood, which saves time on trimming out the loads.



Trees are skidded to the processor, which merchandizes and piles logs at the loader. Sorts include pulpwood, cut-up and treelength sawlogs with 6 in. tops and butt diameters, 10 inches and up. In the past, Mickey has also cut small "hewlogs" with an 8 in. DBH and 5 in. top. In the last year though, he's noted the mills he normally delivers to have taken a second look at the benefits. He surmises, "It sounded good when they first came out with that. But in the long run, I think a lot of your bigger wood was being put into this canter wood. There's a big difference in price so I think a lot of people are steering away from it."

The logger didn't choose a stroke delimeter to accomplish the merchandising because he felt that was overkill in the smaller wood. It also doesn't work as fast as the processing head, which he estimates has a feed rate of 15 ft. per second.

Prior to purchasing the Tigercat, Mickey visited the landing of fellow logger Chip Capps near the Virginia border to see a 650 operating in a similar application. The purchase decision was based on price and prior experiences with the manufacturer and the dealer.

"In my dealings with Tigercat in the past, they seemed to always stand behind what they built and they've really made a big effort since we've had this machine," he says. "Tigercat and Tidewater have done an excellent job of keeping it up. No one really knew a whole lot about it when we got the thing, so it's been a learning process for everybody."

One thing he has found is that the system is ideally suited for timber 16 in. and under. Although it is capable of processing stems up to 24 inches in diameter, it is not as efficient in larger timber.

Mickey's processor is equipped with a topping saw and its processing arms are a little different from traditional CTL applications. These are designed to pick up wood from a log pile. Another feature that has impressed the logger is the computer program, which has a total of 33 settings for various species and log specifications. The measuring device was calibrated when it was set up at delivery and has held true ever since.

The only problem he's experienced is knife wear in the curve of the unit's four delimiting knives. Knife life appears to be about 400 hours, which is attributed to the high stem count the machine handles in this application as well as sand and grit on the skidded logs. They have rebuilt this two to three inch wear section on the knives twice.

Staffing

Mickey ran the processor until just recently when he hired a new crewman for one of the loaders. "I knew it was going to be a learning process," he explains. "If I had taken somebody off of another machine (to run the processor) I would have had to replace him. Then I'd have two trainees at once and production would suffer."



The computer system is user friendly. Anyone with a little computer knowledge and some experience running equipment would have no problem learning it, Mickey reports. His biggest problem is just finding young people that want to work in logging.

With no family in the business, the first generation logger values the contributions and hard work of his employees highly. "If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have what I have today," he asserts. "I think if you don't have good employees, it is going to tell in any business. They make it look good or bad, regardless of what you do."



Three of the six woodsmen have been on board over five years. Loader operator Luther Diggs and skidder driver Raymond Horne, Jr. each have 16 years with the company and feller-buncher operator Wayne Suggs has nearly six. James Davis, Scott Jones and new hire Andy Monroe complete the woods team. Davis drives a skidder; Jones has moved to the processor and Monroe is training on the loader.

Mickey is fully certified under the ProLogger training program through North Carolina Forestry Assn. Crew members are sent to specific NCFCA training course that will help them work professionally and safely.

The logger holds monthly safety meetings and continuously watches for any unsafe practices that need to be addressed. He reports only one lost time accident in the last 16 years, which he attributes to getting men off the ground and into a safer, mechanized environment. The businessman reports his workers comp experience mod is currently about .80. Carrier is Forestry Mutual Insurance available through NCFCA.

Secretary Donna Rieschel is Mickey's capable assistant in the office. She is responsible for administrative duties including bookkeeping, operational reports and compliance records.

Operations

Remaining equipment in the lineup includes an '02 Tigercat 724D feller-buncher; two '00 John Deere 648G skidders with dual arch grapples; '00 Prentice 410E loader and CTR pull-through delimber; '04 Tigercat 230B loader. Stihl chain saws are used to cut the occasional hardwood, limb bigger trees and to trim truckloads. Total value of his ironworks is about \$1.1 million.



Along with Tigercat dealer Tidewater Equipment, the businessman also relies on suppliers Pioneer Machinery in Florence, NC, for Prentice loaders and James River Equipment, Mt. Gilead, for John Deere skidders. All three have given him good service over the years. He is especially pleased with the service life he gets from John Deere motors and transmissions.

Loaders are typically set up at separate landings with one skidder assigned to each. Suggs performs operator select thinnings on fifth row spacing to achieve a 70 sq. ft. basal area. Since there are more sawlogs in the "down" or "drive" row, skidders drag that row to the track-mounted processor where possible.



Thinning jobs require more planning to help keep skid distances under control. Mickey would like to keep that down to 1,000 ft. but it can run as much as 1,500 ft., particularly when there are pre-existing roads.

The company runs two '97 Kenworth trucks purchased from Carolina

Kenworth in Charlotte, NC. Truck drivers are Kevin Bowman and Wayne Hanna. Contract haulers include Gomiller Trucking of Rockingham whose owner J.J. Gomiller is a former employee, now in his second year of running his own truck, and Jonathan Lowry of Pembroke, who supplies one or two haul trucks, depending on the logger's needs.

Load weights are tracked to ensure that the team is staying within legal weight limits. The businessman reports a consistent average of 25 to 26 tons per load without resorting to load scales, which he believes offer little advantage as long as they can stay within an acceptable range.

He reports no major trucking challenges though insurance and fuel costs continue their upward climb. The logger estimates his off-road fuel usage at roughly 1,000 gallons per week, which is stored at the job site in two 500 gal. tanks. Huntley Oil Co., Wadesboro, NC, delivers the fuel. Oil is purchased in bulk 55 gal. drums.

Wilco Hess fuel cards are used at various Hess locations to refuel diesel trucks. An alternate fuel and lubricant supplier is Swink Oil Co. in Rockingham.

Operators are responsible for preventive maintenance of their own mounts. Oil and hydraulic filter changes are completed every 200 hours or as specified by the manufacturer. Spill kits are kept on the service trucks to protect the site. Used oil is recycled as fuel for the shop's oil burner. Normal equipment rotation is about five years.

Attracting young workers to the logging profession and continued trends toward urban expansion are cited as key challenges the industry will face in North Carolina. Mickey's concern is that as these big blocks of timberland are broken up, it will bring problems down the road. New residents from non-forested regions will move in and expect to dictate what can and can't be done in North Carolina. Mickey hasn't had a problem with protestors on his jobs yet. But there have already been protests in rapidly growing urban centers around the state.



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