



Cat equipment up to the challenge

Alberta's R. Bruce Erickson Construction has taken on some challenging harvesting jobs with the very capable support of their Cat equipment, including the first Cat 551 feller buncher sold in Western Canada.

By Tony Kryzanowski

As logging contractors go, they don't come much more experienced and diversified than Alberta's R. Bruce Erickson Construction. And when such veteran contractors start sounding the alarm bells, it should be enough for everyone to take notice.

"It's probably as bad now as it has ever been," says Murray Erickson, who today manages the day to day operations of the Sundre, Alberta-based logging business with his brother, Allan.

R. Bruce Erickson Construction was incorporated 38 years ago by their father, Bruce Erickson, who followed in his father's footsteps into forestry, but chose logging over sawmilling. All three are partners in the business.

R. Bruce Erickson Construction harvests 180,000 cubic metres of softwood for West Fraser Timber's Sundre Forest Products Division, supplying peeler logs for its laminated veneer lumber (LVL) plant at Strachan, and sawlogs to its dimension sawmill in Sundre.

The Ericksons feel fortunate to be working for a large company like West Fraser Timber, especially supplying logs for its sawmill in Sundre, which is one of the company's most efficient sawmills. West Fraser and R. Bruce Erickson Construction have developed a strong working relationship over the years, as the Ericksons have been willing to expand their services to address the needs of West Fraser.

Bruce started out as a logging contractor working for Spray Lake Sawmills further south in Cochrane, then relocated to Sundre along with his sons to work strictly as a road building contractor for Sunpine Forest Products, which is now owned by West Fraser. When road building work dropped off, the Ericksons took on a logging contract, and later added drag scarifying as part of West Fraser's reforestation program. Now, they even maintain roads for other logging contractors.

Bruce, Murray and Allan earned their stripes like many veterans in today's industry at the end of a chainsaw. They survived the early years of mechanization when it seemed like loggers were treated like the research and development department for equipment and attachment suppliers struggling to adapt to the brave new world of mechanical logging. A far cry from today's operator friendly, purpose-built, computer-controlled, high performance feller bunchers, skidders, delimiters and processors--each Erickson family member has a few battle scars and choice words for some of those early entries.

Today, the stump to dump logging company operates some of the most advanced equipment on today's market, including the first Caterpillar 551 feller buncher sold in Western Canada.

In addition to a variety of forest management services, R. Bruce Erickson Construction also offers salvage logging on leases and rights-of-way for the oil patch. It's not a business opportunity the company pursues aggressively, but it doesn't shy away from it



either when approached, as one of the benefits of working in the oil patch is the ability to hire out equipment by the hour.

In 2006, the oil patch supplied 40 per cent of the company's revenue, although that has dropped off considerably in the last couple of years. That drop-off just reinforced R. Bruce Erickson Construction's first and foremost commitment: to the forest industry.

The company has up to 30 employees and operates about 10 months a year, shutting down only for spring breakup. It's practically a necessity to operate year round to keep good employees, says Murray, and he reports it's even difficult to find workers willing to live in camp these days. Most want to be home every night.

There is a mix of pride and concern in what the Ericksons have to say about the industry these days. All three owners are proud of the harvesting and reforestation work they've done on the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, pointing out old camp locations that are now nearly indistinguishable because of the amount of forest regeneration that has occurred. They are also proud of the projects they've been involved in over the years, including clearing the site of the Nakiska downhill ski venue, which hosted ski events during the Winter Olympics in 1988.

R. Bruce Erickson Construction has also hosted several tours for college students, to demonstrate the work they've done and its impact on the environment.

"It's really interesting to be able to talk to these college students and answer their questions about reforestation and whether or not it works," says Allan. "All we have to do is point out some of the regenerated cutblocks that we cut 20 years ago and say, 'here's the proof', because we were the ones who cut it."

But Murray wonders about the fallout among logging contractors if the current industry downturn continues over the long haul. He's hoping that the industry will improve by 2010.

"One thing that makes me nervous is when things do turn around, how many contractors are going to be left standing?" he asks. "When they have the opportunity to go to work, they might not be able to go to work." He says that R. Bruce Erickson Construction is not buying new equipment to replace older equipment as often as it should, and as a consequence, they have faced some big repair bills. Given the current state of the industry, it is difficult to justify making that type of investment at the present time, and the situation is similar throughout the industry.

Allan is equally concerned what the future might hold.

"It's never been green, green pastures out here for the logging industry," he says. "For the last little while, we've been working for frozen rates because of the downturn." While they understand the current state of the forest industry, the Ericksons are worried how long they and other contractors will be expected to work for those rates, and are concerned that many won't survive.

Allan described loggers as a breed apart, but the Erickson are just hoping that loggers don't become a disappearing breed.

A good example of the kind of stress currently being experienced by logging contractors was a recent spike in diesel fuel prices. R. Bruce Erickson Construction appreciated that West Fraser adjusted its rates to factor in that increase. However, Murray says a large increase in something as critical as fuel has long term effects in a variety of other areas of the operation because of the influence it has on the cost of other items.



“When diesel fuel goes up, everything else goes up,” he says. “Your batteries for pick-up trucks are twice as much, along with increases to headlights, window washer fluid, and so on. While the cost of diesel fuel has decreased to what it is today, the cost for none of these other items is dropping.”

Throughout its history as a mechanized logger, R. Bruce Erickson Construction has tended toward Caterpillar equipment, from Alberta Cat distributor Finning Canada. That includes the use initially of the TK, and later the Timberking line of feller bunchers when Caterpillar began manufacturing the product themselves. The company has owned a TK1161 feller buncher and two TK1127 feller bunchers. Today, the company’s fleet includes a TK722 zero tail swing tilter, and a Caterpillar 551.

“Finning’s a big company and the availability of their service is probably the number one thing that keeps us going back there,” says Murray. “Their product support is great. They’ve got a parts drop box in Sundre for overnight parts delivery, and they are the only ones to do that.”

Both the TK722 tilter and Caterpillar 551 fulfill a specific purpose in the company’s operations. The smaller TK722 is particularly useful on steeper ground and for right-of-way or lease salvage work. Also, because it is a lighter unit, it is easier to move around.

Size was a factor when R. Bruce Erickson Construction purchased its Caterpillar 551 in 2008. It has an operating weight without the head of 30,119 kgs, and comes equipped with a 305 gross horsepower Cat C9 ACERT engine. The Ericksons have equipped this unit with a 22 inch hotsaw head. Its maximum reach with the head is 8.6 metres.

It’s burning about 36 litres of fuel per hour in the Erickson operation.

After 3000 hours, the company is satisfied with its performance, although it has had to adapt to the IQAN display system. IQAN allows the operator to continuously monitor the operating systems of the machine. This provides early warning for potential problems.

“You don’t have any pilot pressure lines or hoses anymore,” says Murray, “so you are dealing with that. That’s been a learning curve for both Finning and us.”

Supporting the feller bunchers are four skidders. Two are Cat 525 skidders and two are larger, Cat 545 skidders. All logs are processed at roadside.

The company employs five processors, consisting of three Waratah 622B processors and two Risley Cobra processor heads. There are two sorts. Peeler logs are strictly pine and are processed to 17’3”, with a 6” top to 17” butt. Everything else is processed into sawlogs in increments of 16’4”, 14’4”, and 12’4”. The processor carriers include three Cat 320 carriers, a Cat 325 and a Cat 330.

“We have equipped the 325 and 330 with a quick attach so that we can take the processor heads off and put a bucket on them,” says Murray. “That way, we can utilize them for doing road work, loading or whatever.”

The company has two loaders--a Cat 330 loader and a 325, each equipped with shortwood grapples. Rounding out the fleet are a half-dozen Cat D6, D7, and D8 dozers, and a couple of Cat backhoes.