Logging & Sawmilling Journal

Grinding ‘er out

B.C.’s Pioneer Logging is busy on the logging side, but the company is also very active on the grinding side, with two newly acquired Peterson grinders providing wood biomass to a pellet mill and a nearby power plant.

By Jim Stirling

Pioneer Logging has never been busier.

But that comes as no surprise to the company. Rather, suggests David Chevigny, a partner in the enterprise, the Pioneer family of companies are doing so well despite the times because they are diverse, open-minded and thrive on managing risk. It’s proven a heady formula.

Pioneer Logging Ltd., is based in Williams Lake, in the heart of British Columbia’s Cariboo Country. It is one of several companies under the Pioneer family banner formed to manage the group’s expanding and diversified interests, primarily focused on the efficient utilization of wood fibre.

In the last calendar year, Pioneer Logging harvested around 600,000 cubic metres of wood, about 400,000 cubic metres of which were sawlogs.

They were delivered as specified to Canfor, West Fraser, Tolko and Dunkley Lumber, the principal licencees in the region. About another half-million cubic metres were harvested from B.C. Timber Sales around the province.

Those volumes are over and above a 15 million cubic metre bank of sawlogs accumulated through a program of purchases of long term non-replaceable forest licences. The clock is ticking for several of these. Sawlog quality material is waning because of the damage wreaked by the mountain pine beetle epidemic.

Pioneer is also active in whole log chipping and are innovators in the grinding of wood residues left after harvesting logs for commodity lumber production.

Pioneer Logging has a 25 per cent partnership in Nanaimo Forest Products which resurrected the Harmac pulp mill in Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island. Employees also have a 25 per cent equity stake in the company. The 60-year-old operation has been rejuvenated under the new ownership structure and hailed as a template for the ailing pulp and paper industry on the B.C. coast.

Pioneer Log Homes is a well-established member of the family and has forged a world-wide reputation for quality custom products.

A more recent cousin is Pioneer Family Land, which is in the development and construction business. It assembled a commercial area in Williams Lake where Wal-Mart is the anchor tenant. The division was also responsible for the Pioneer Family’s home base in a re-designed college building occupying a panoramic perch overlooking the city.

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On a recent visit to Williams Lake, Logging & Sawmilling Journal took a closer look at two of Pioneer's forest industry initiatives: residual grinding and active logging.

The grinding site was southeast of Williams Lake while the logging show was high in the Big Creek region on the Chilcotin Plateau to the west.

Pioneer Logging's operational areas are as diverse as the company. To the east is steep terrain, heavy snowfall country supporting spruce with piece counts one cubic metre per tree. Out west are the pine flats where piece counts can shrivel to .1 cubic metres/stem.

Prime conversion machines on the grinding side were two 700 hp Peterson grinders, acquired by Pioneer early in 2009. "We were looking for a company that would work with us, to make the operation as productive as possible," recalls Pioneer's Chevigny.

Peterson's Larry Campbell and the engineering staff were willing to accommodate Chevigny's suggestions. The first two changes incorporated on Pioneer's 4710 grinders make the units higher, wider and faster paced.

Increasing ground clearance and extending the width of the tracks helps the Peterson units better accommodate the bush conditions they encounter on a daily basis in central B.C. The improvements create less ground disturbance and a more stable working environment, explains Chevigny.

Adding a two speed track motor allows the Peterson machines to walk more efficiently between piles and there's plenty of moving required.

"The changes have worked out well," says Chevigny. The grinders were being fed by a Link-Belt 210 and Cat 324 fitted with oversize grapples.

Pioneer places considerable importance on back-up equipment and services to maintain the side's productivity. For example, Dennis Chutskoff is Pioneer's designated mechanic with a service truck for the two grinders.

Support equipment includes a Cat 545 skidder. "You need them," declares Chevigny. "You need the infrastructure for grinding to be productive."

And productive it was. The two Peterson machines were producing 20 Super B loads of ground residues a day. The material was being primarily delivered to Pinnacle Pellet's plants and the Capital Power Income L.P. biomass power plant in Williams Lake.

The grinder's fast production pace keeps side supervisor Joe Webster on his toes. The 16-year man with Pioneer has to line up and prepare the blocks to keep the grinders busy and that can be quite the challenge.

Most of the material the loaders and grinders have to deal with has been windrowed and piled any which way in preparation for burning, not grinding. And that's certainly not helpful for re-handling and converting to raw material for a new wood product industry.

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Chevigny likens the quantum switch loggers had to make with machines, block layout and attitude when converting from logging to landings to roadside harvesting systems. It's one thing when Pioneer is working its own licences. "We can look at the total block, sawlogs, pulp logs, biomass right through planting to free-to-grow stage," he explains.

"Every permit is different but it comes naturally to us that we lay out the block differently, and position logging roads that are friendly for grinding and chip trucks." Chip trucks, for example, typically require more road building with stretched corners and more turn arounds.

Similarly, material remaining after logging and prior to grinding on Pioneer's claims is grouped more loosely in smaller piles with oriented stems.

"But it's different when we go in behind other licencees." Which is one reason why Chevigny says he appreciates the attitude and willingness to try new approaches demonstrated by Guenter Wernecke, West Fraser's woodlands manager for Williams Lake and his on the-the-ground lieutenant Rob Sutton, along with Steve Sheldon and Doug Purdue who occupy similar roles for Dunkley Lumber. "They also want to see wood products, not smoke," declares Chevigny "But we have to be creative to make it happen."

The logging show LSJ visited was a 50,000 cubic metre block for West Fraser. It was located 5200 feet above sea level with stunning views to the southeast of the Coast Mountains. The timber was small diameter lodgepole pine (with an average .12 cubic metre piece count) and unusually heavy green, good quality timber.

Chevigny surmises the elevation saved it from the worst of the beetles.

The newest piece of equipment working the claim was a 2009 John Deere 903J feller buncher, purchased through the Brandt Tractor dealership in Williams Lake. "John Deere makes good proven machines," he observes. But the deal clincher came down to a single word: price, says Chevigny.

Working with the 903 was a Direct 257 buncher acquired with 300 hours on it in 2007. Chevigny notes the Direct bunchers were purchased by Volvo and are now serviced through Great West Equipment. Both machines have reportedly performed well.

A Cat 545 and a 525 were handling the skidding chores to roadside where three company processors were available: a Link-Belt 210; Cat 320 and a Deere 2054. A second 2054 was loading logging trucks. Two processing contractors were also on site. Back-up equipment included a Cat D-8 and 14 G grader. Once again, Pioneer had a dedicated full time mechanic for the side which was producing about 20 loads a day. Andy Sailor was Pioneer's on-site logging supervisor.

As the pick-up bumped its way from the harvesting site, Chevigny indicated a nearby logged off block. "Three years ago we burned that block. Now we're getting a new product," he says. "For years we've been looking to do something with this material apart from wasting it and harming the environment by burning it. Our ultimate goal is 100 per cent utilization of the wood."