



Less is More

For Littlejohn Logging, scaling back was the answer

By Bob Bruce

Not many years ago, brothers Doug and Gary Littlejohn of Grande Ronde, Ore., were busy working from dawn to dark doing contract logging for the likes of International Paper and Boise. Each brother ran a side -- either tower or shovel logging -- and for a time, they had as many as 18 employees on the payroll.

Times have changed, and the brothers have adapted. These days, it's just Doug, Gary, and Gary's son Mike and, for the most part, they only harvest what grows on their family-owned 1,100-acre tree farm.

80 Years of History

Logging or timber industry-related work has been a large part of the Littlejohn family for more than 80 years. As a teenager, their father, Elwin Littlejohn, got work skidding logs for railroad ties at a local mill. As Elwin got older, he stayed in the logging business and eventually was able to pull in his own contract logging jobs.

In the early 1940s, Elwin moved to Grande Ronde and began working for Long-Bell Lumber, which owned much of the marketable timber in the area. Elwin and his wife settled in, but unfortunately for them -- and everyone else -- the industry was on a collision course with massive changes in markets, timber availability, environmental concerns, and a global economy.

Investing in the Future

Fortunately for Doug, Gary, and their families, Elwin had a plan.

"Around 1950, our folks bought the first of three parcels of land here in Grande Ronde," says Doug. "At the time, second growth was not a priority item -- there weren't a lot of sawmills that were buying second growth timber or were set up to saw it. I think my dad was mostly looking for a way to raise cows and do some farming."

Eventually Elwin bought two more adjoining parcels, bringing the total up to 1,100 acres. Of that, about 760 acres were in timber. "At the time, our dad was in a financial situation where he didn't need to cut any trees so the wooded section was basically forgotten and left to regenerate on its own."

Bringing it Home

When the business cycles in logging began to fluctuate more severely in the 1980s, and then again in the 1990s, the family-owned land, with its relative abundance of marketable timber, began to take on new importance.

"When they shut down the logging up around here in the early 1980s, we went to work for International Paper at their Gardiner division in Reedsport," says Doug. "But after a while we decided we were just turning wheels living away from home, and we got kids growing up at home -- and we're not there -- so we came back here to try to find some work."



They were able to pick up some jobs with Boise. “We could get a job now and then,” says Doug, “but the crew can’t get by with just a job now and then so it got more difficult to keep a crew.”

The solution? Pull back the scope of their operations. From a peak of close to 20 employees when the market was strong and the mills were busy, the brothers downsized to not much more than themselves, Gary’s son Mike, and the occasional hired hand. And instead of bidding out jobs, they focused on managing and marketing the timber available to them on their family woodlot.

Focus on the Tree Farm

“We actively manage the tree farm,” he continues. “We planted one area around 1980 and then three years ago, we went through and opened it up with a skidder and then thinned out just what the processor could reach from the skidder road. We weren’t going for any particular spacing, just trying to get some more growth out of it and improve the stand.”

“Over the years, we’ve gone back and planted some of the open areas and some of the meadows so we have more timber now than we did when we started. We never thinned the area in the back of the property; we basically left it to grow on its own. It’s tight and straight and tall, with a fine grain. It’s really nice product.”

Lately, those trees have been their primary product. They’ve been pulling out a steady stream of high quality 90-footers for telephone poles, along with a smaller percentage of 30-50 footers.

Downsizing Pays Off

Since the Littlejohns base their harvesting plans on whatever is currently fetching the best price, and because they cut such a small volume, they can be the ultimate in just-in-time producers. Their overhead is low, and they keep their equipment costs down by buying quality machines, keeping them well maintained, and keeping them in service as long as it makes sense.

Currently they have a 1980 John Deere 790D log loader, a JD 790E processor, a Cat D5 high track, a JD 550, and some other support items.

“We usually hold onto our equipment for quite a while,” he says. “We try to keep our payments at a minimum or have everything paid off, and we usually finance our purchases in-house, or we have enough to pay it off.”

Although the Littlejohns could have taken a path of aiming for continued growth as a way to deal with market changes, Doug says they are just as happy having taken the downsizing route. “We could have added more sides, more crews over the years when we were working steady in the good years, but we chose not to.”

Part of the reason for that, aside from what they hope is an increase in job security and income protection, is the greater freedom they now have to enjoy life.

“We don’t have to get up early in the morning anymore,” says Doug. “We work maybe two or three days a week. I drive the truck, and I haul maybe four loads a week. Gary runs the loader. Mike runs the processor. Before, we couldn’t do that. We’ve all got decent homes to live in, and we can buy groceries. If the right opportunity came along we’d probably look



at it, but we don't have to be out knocking on doors all the time."

As for the future, their hope is that the business model they've come up with will be both strong enough and flexible enough that their children and their children's children will continue to benefit from it.

"We want it to be a sustainable business so it just carries on. Whether the logging company will continue or not, I don't know. But the tree farm will," says Doug.