



Looking Up During an Economic Downturn

An Unconventional Rocky Mountain Woodsman leans on his Wood-Mizer

By C. Clayton

Sean Sheehan says few things are more enjoyable to him than gripping a sharp chainsaw while standing in the midst of a patch of good timber and planning a harvest. Almost everything else about Sean Sheehan's logging operation in Basin, Montana, would be considered, by most, to be unconventional; including the fact that Sean is staying busy, productive, and profitable during the current recession.

Logging to Support Construction

Sean Sheehan doesn't really consider himself to be a logger in the traditional sense. He is, he says, really more of a construction contractor who also happens to log. For Sean, the logging and sawmilling end of his operation is a very important "means to an end." That means provides Sean with an expanded ability to profitably meet the needs of his marketplace.

A contractor who erects high quality log/timber structures, Sean begins the process of building by harvesting select trees then milling those trees into timbers and lumber using a Wood-Mizer portable thin kerf band sawmill. The materials generated in that process are then used to provide customers with unique, high-end finished products that simply cannot be economically produced from materials purchased through traditional supply channels.

According to Sean, his ability to convert standing trees into finished structures, and do it all in-house, is an essential element in the success of his business.

Practical Environmentalism

Most of the trees Sean harvests to support his business are already dead. Pine trees killed by insects are removed from five 40-acre tracts of privately owned forestlands near Sean's home in Basin, Montana. Instead of logging on shares, or getting paid for the volume of timber he produces, Sean typically removes dead/dying trees as a service at no charge to landowners in exchange for fiber he recovers from the timber.

"I can save money for landowners who must remove the dead trees to reduce fire danger and improve their stands," says Sean. "In most cases, land owners would otherwise have to pay someone to remove the dead trees for pulp or firewood."

When You Can See the Forest for the Trees

As Sean's company name -- Rocky Mountain Wood-Mizer -- suggests, he uses a Wood-Mizer brand portable sawmill to process logs into lumber. He is also a regional rep. The LT40 model Sean uses comes with a trailer package allowing the entire mill to be easily towed behind a standard $\frac{3}{4}$ ton pickup. Once on site, Sean says, the mill can be set up and ready to mill lumber in ten minutes. The mill features hydraulic lifting arms, a log turner, and clamps designed to take much of the labor out of processing logs as large as 36 inches in diameter and over 20 feet long.



“Because the mill is a precision machine, we use it on site like a planer to flatten timbers, posts, and beams that have bowed or warped in the drying process,” Sean says. “We also use it to make all our material uniform before assembly as well as for sizing material to fit. The mill not only saves us a lot of time and money, it also makes for a better end product.”

In the woods, Sean comments, the use of the Wood-Mizer allows him to create products that are simply not available to most contractors. Unique trees with defects and sweeps that would otherwise be culled at traditional processing facilities can be used to create superior products using the sawmill. “By way of example,” Sean explains, “We can take a 12-foot log with a significant sweep and, after a little time on the deck of the sawmill, convert it into an arch for a doorway with more character and structural strength than a conventionally created arch would provide. Customers are willing to pay top dollar for such products because they cannot get them anywhere else.”

On-Site Sawmilling is an Environmental Benefit

Because the sawmill is easy to move and set up, Sean takes the sawmill to the logs in most cases. And rather than horsing logs around the woods with conventional equipment, Sean makes optimal use of an 81 horsepower rubber-tired Bobcat A300 skid-steer, which is valued for its versatility and ability to get the job done with minimal ground disturbance. The Bobcat’s articulated steering, ability to lift 3000 pounds, and its grapple/fork combination allow for threading logs between the standing healthy trees without damaging them and without tearing up the ground. Sean says that the Bobcat’s ability to “tread lightly” has actually been a selling point for many of his small landowner customers who tend to be quite particular about how the site looks when the logging is done.

As utilized by Sean, the Bobcat is also a multi-use machine. It is used to pile brush, scarify the land when desired to improve forest regeneration, remove large timbers from the sawmill deck, and in the construction of the structures that Rocky Mountain builds.

Sean is proud of the environmental benefits his operation brings to his community. Because of the sawmill he notes, “We are able to use dead trees that otherwise may be burned or left to rot, which releases greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. We save fossil fuel because we do not transport the logs, and the thin kerf blades allow us to get more lumber from each tree. By using the dead trees to meet the need for lumber, healthy trees are left standing in another forest, the emissions associated with harvesting them are eliminated, and they continue to scrub carbon from the atmosphere.”

Customized Products for the Future

Rocky Mountain Wood-Mizer has, until recently, focused on providing custom-built structures as their end product and has made logging and sawmilling vital links in the chain of profitability in their operation.

Looking to the future, Sean says the company is considering offering customized log/timber home kits using the same innovative processes that have made the company successful in the construction business.