



Teamwork, timing, & training

Skyline Thinning knows how to get the job done

By Bob Bruce

Those who succeed in the logging industry generally discover that the key to surviving is finding a large enough niche, with strong demand, and developing the skills that can give you an edge against your competitors.

Developing a Niche

For Pete Bailey of Skyline Thinning in Springfield, Ore., the niche that has kept him in business and working steadily since 1994 is contract short-tower thinning of government sales. When we talked to him, he was busy decking logs at a BLM sale called Black Top Thin.

“Swanson-Superior bought the sale and we got the contract logging on it,” he says. The timber sale was approximately 500 acres, with about 7 million board feet to be removed. The job had a 36-month time limit, with road-building taking the first 12 months. Bailey says he relies heavily on the ability of his five crews to work as a well-coordinated team and move quickly as the demands of the job change.

Over the years, Bailey has worked on state, BLM, and Forest Service sales. The mills buy the sales and contract Skyline Thinning to do the logging. Skyline cuts, yards, and loads the timber, either on trucks the mills supply, or on trucks that Bailey subcontracts. The one thing the various jobs have in common, he says, is that they are almost always different.

Working with Regulations

Depending on who owns the land and where it's located, Bailey also has to deal with a variety of access windows and cutting restrictions. “The government sales don't use the spotted owl restriction protocol like they did at one time — they just call it all potential spotted owl and shut you off from March 1 to July 15, normally. Then your sap flow restriction usually starts April 15 until about the middle of July — it's at their discretion when the sap starts drying up.”

That can eat up a lot of valuable harvest time, unless the logger gets a sap flow waiver. Fortunately, Bailey has been able to obtain such waivers most times — but it takes some work and planning.

“We put a lot of money and time into our layout work,” he says. “If you get a waiver for sap flow, they require that the corridor should look as good when you're done as if you weren't working in sap flow. We use these tree saver pads that we can actually strap on the tree if we know we're going to rub it. Then when we finish the corridor, we cut anything we use as a rub tree and take them out in the end. That way, when you're done, with a corridor it leaves a nice clear corridor.”

Most of Bailey's jobs specify removing anywhere from a third to a half of the total volume, rather than a simple clearcut. As a result, he says it is very important that both crews and equipment be flexible and reliable.



“The less volume, the more actually you are moving and rigging up. It’s more costly when you do a smaller volume per acre sale than when you do something where you’re in one place longer. But we’ve learned to get around and log through some fairly tight stands. For these little short towers, you’ve got to rig for lift, so we get intermediate supports and tail trees to make it work.”

The Right Yarder

Bailey started out with a Koller K501 tower yarder. “It was a pretty easy way to get started and a fairly inexpensive machine,” he says. “It was a good training method for me because I learned how to finesse logs and rig for lift because those little machines aren’t powerhouses.”

He soon moved up to a more powerful Diamond swing yarder, which meant increased volume, but also meant he needed a loader with lots of mobility to keep up with the production.

“When you’re moving say 300 to 500 pieces a day of these small trees — and they’re not limbed — that’s a big bottleneck on the landing. So I tried one of these little Dansco pull-through delimiters. They are fairly inexpensive, and they’re mobile. You just sit them right on the landing. The loader then sets a log down on it and that activates the blades. They come up around the log, then he pulls it through, and you’ve got your logs delimbed. Then you can just set it out there, and they run and tape and buck their log out, and you’ve got it.”

Once he figured out how to make these various pieces work together efficiently, he expanded by purchasing more of the same. “We just kept pretty much standardizing. We’ve got five Diamonds now, which is good because I know what the equipment can do, and it’s easier parts-wise and maintenance-wise.”

The Iron that Gets the Job Done

Bailey says his workhorses are his five Diamond D210 swing yarders. About a year ago, he picked up a Timbermaster, “It’s basically a Yutani backhoe with a pin-on mast Jewel puts out, with some H25 high speed Allied winches on it that we yard with. It’s been a good little machine for those short corners.”

In the summer when the ground firms up, he switches to ground-based operations. “We pre-bunch the logs out on the skid trails and then come in with our 527 grapple Cat and pull them out.

“I have four 2054 JD log loaders, three 240 Linkbelt log loaders, and a little JD 200 loader for kind of a spare machine. We also have a little 550 JD that we use as a yarding cat for small wood, and a 540 JD grapple skidder. We’re up to about seven of the Dansco pull-through delimiters now. We’ve got two Acme 15 radio-lock carriages, and five Eaglet carriages. That’s about it.”

The Cost of Idle Equipment

The one small drawback of having so much equipment is that you have to keep it busy or it costs you just sitting around. And since equipment doesn’t run itself, you need good people.

“If you’re rigging an intermediate and tail tree on every road, there’s quite a bit of time involved in terms of getting it all set up for your next road. One guy couldn’t keep up, so I have a helper with him as a trainee.”



Bailey says, “It’s not like the good old days, where you’ve got a rigging slinger down hooking logs up, and you’ve got a couple choker setters helping. I have four guys in the brush. I’ve got the hook tender and helper — then I’ve got two riggers. And they’re both rigging slingers – it’s not like one guy calls the shots. They’re both independent riggers and they pre-set on each side of the line. Those are your key people, your production guys.”

Keeping Riggers Busy

With six yarder sides, he’s got 12 riggers. To keep them busy and useful, he’s always moving the crews around to new jobs and in and out of existing jobs as the various restriction windows open. “Once you get them trained up, the crews have to work as a team, because it’s a real team-oriented type of logging. Everything has got to go smooth, because you’ve got to be fast to keep enough logs flowing down the road to make it.”

Why not simply hire the manpower as needed? Because according to Bailey, “If you want it done your way, according to your system, it’s better to keep in house and keep training and cross-training people. So when somebody quits or you’ve got an opening, you’ve got somebody you can move in.”

Plus, there’s always the matter of maintaining quality and consistency. “I run bigger crews than a lot of thinning operations do, but I think it’s paid off because the mills like it if they know you can go in there and get the job done, and still have the quality control that they expect.”

He adds. “You’ve got to cut through a lot of these little logs on these sales, and the mills want them right. So we try to do that and still be able to go in there and move a lot of volume when they need it moved.”