



Making It Work

For 33 years, Pernsteiner Logging has been logging on the Colville National Forest and adapting to change along the way

By Diane Mettler

In 1985, TimberWest magazine profiled a young Colville, Wash., logger, named Mike Pernsteiner. He had started up his operation nine years earlier, after working as a cruiser for Vaagen Brothers. The article featured Mike, his crew, and his Cat 227 feller buncher.

The Cat has been retired, but Mike and his crew are still going strong. In fact, many of the crew members we featured in that article are still with Mike today.

Ups and Downs

Pernsteiner Logging is still in the game because it has adapted with the changing industry. Mike initially started out with a couple of guys. The operation continued to grow, and the crew was doing both tractor and line logging, working for Vaagen Brothers, Boise Cascade, and private landowners.

Lately, he has downsized, making the necessary adjustments to stay in business in an extremely tough market and ensuring his crew is working, despite the market slump.

Mike and his wife, Candy, currently employ 17 people, and the company works solely for Vaagen Brothers.

Candy, with a degree in forestry, and a 20-year career with Boise Cascade as a logging superintendent, says the entire team is focused on making it work. For example, Candy does the bookwork and goes to the forest service meetings, which frees up the crew to keep producing logs.

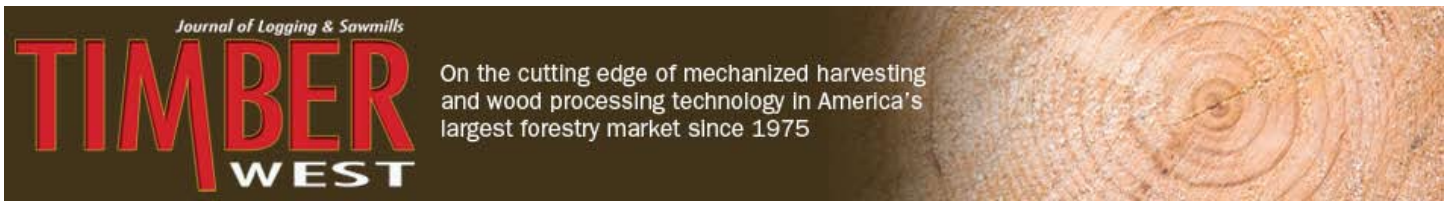
In the Woods

Mike works three sides -- two mechanical and one cut-to-length. "On the cut-to-length side, we run a Valmet Forwarder 890.3 and two Timbco 425s with Logmax heads 750 and 7000," says Candy. "Troy Yeo, our CTL foreman has been with Mike for eight years."

On the two mechanical logging sides, Mike runs Timbco 445s with Quadco heads. "We primarily skid with John Deere 648G skidders," says Candy. "And we have a Cat 527 on each side. We also use a John Deere loader on one side and a Cat 320 log loader on the other."

As for processors, the crews operate two Kobelcos with Logmax heads on one side and a Timbco 445 with a Valmet 385 head on the other.

"We also have Promac masticating heads for the Timbcos, which come in handy on these stewardship projects we're doing now," adds Candy.



The Pernsteiners have invested heavily in Timbcos -- they have seven in all. Why so many? "They do the best work on this kind of ground," says Candy. "We log some pretty steep ground at times. And they've done well."

Keeping It Up and Running

To keep the machines in top shape, Mike and Candy employ one full-time mechanic, Travis Willey. He spends most of his days in the woods keeping things running. But if things get slow, you'll see him operating a processor.

"During the spring, when we're shut down, he'll work on machines at the shop. But mostly we try to keep him out in the woods," says Candy.

Thinning & More Thinning

One of the big changes since the 1985 TimberWest article is the type of jobs Mike takes. Candy says today they primarily do thinning and stewardship projects. For example, the current project they're on is a fuels reductions job, and the crew is taking the trees down to 3" DBH and removing them for pulpwood.

"About 40 percent of our tonnage is pulpwood -- the other 60 percent is saw logs," says Candy. "Handling that many pieces of small diameter material, it gets more and more challenging to find ways to make the cuts profitable. That's when we rely on a talented crew."

Top Notch Crew

Of the 17 employees, 12 of them have been with the company for more than 10 years --four of them over 20 years. "The reason we can make these sales work with all this small wood is because of how good our crew is," says Candy.

A long-term relationship with the forest service doesn't hurt either. Over the years, Mike has handled more than 125 Colville National Forest Timber sales. "He works well with all the sale administrators. Between that and our experienced crews, we just don't have too many problems," says Candy.

Cost Conscious

With the industry in a terrible slump, every sale has become more competitive with so many people out of work. And with longer down times during the last couple of winters, it now takes more than just talent and relationships to make these small diameter sales profitable. "We're all conscious of cost, and that's key," says Candy.

"The whole crew is conscious of the fact that this is a tough job to be on because the production is lower than what we normally do. And the times are tough. Everyone is pulling together to make it work," adds Candy. "Mike's also skidding and running processor this year, whenever needed.

"You just have to be as efficient as you can be," she adds. "And you have to hope the mills will keep running."

Stewardship Projects Staying Strong

Pernsteiners have been doing primarily stewardship contracts for the past couple of years and see more of it in the future.

"It's got its challenges. Because those contracts are mostly fire related, they're taking the small diameter material," says Candy. But the company is making them work.



“We actually did the first one that Colville Forest ever put out. It was the Burnt Valley Stewardship, and we did that in 2005. Since then, I think we’ve worked on just about all the rest of them. Maybe we missed a couple.”

The mastication head is ideal for some of these jobs where the Forest Service will allow a machine on pre-commercial thinning units. Pernsteiners have both a drum and disk Promac, but they find the disk has worked better for the thinning.

Although the Pernsteiners have only done a few pre-commercial jobs with the Promac, they feel they come out looking nice. “There isn’t the slash on the ground, because once that head takes down the tree, there just doesn’t seem to be anything left,” says Candy.

By attaching it to one of their Timbcos, “it gives the crew the ability to go just about anywhere that they need to go,” she adds. “It’s not restricted by slope as much as an excavator would be.”

The Future

It’s hard to tell what the future will hold for loggers or when the economy will improve. For now Mike and Candy are going to continue doing what needs to be done.

For the time being that means, among other things, keeping the equipment out there longer. “We’re putting some things off until the economy recovers and doing just what needs to be done” says Candy. “This is probably the hardest time we’ve ever been through, but you’ve just got to move forward and make it work.”