

Long View Forest Advocates Team Concept Provides Ownership Opportunities to Employees

By Anita Boyles - May 5, 2017



Innovation and calculated risks pay off for Vermont cut-to-length logging business.

Some companies do everything by the book. Others are creative and innovative. Long View Forest, located in Westminster, Vermont, is the latter. From the day the company began, the owners have been taking calculated risks that have paid off well.

Jack Bell is the general manager of Long View Forest, and one of its founding partners.

Prior to his involvement in Long View Forest, he had no history in the forest industry.

"My dad was an elementary school principal," Jack said. "My mother was a hospital administrator. There was some logging in my family in Maine, but I lived in New Hampshire and it was nothing I grew up around."

In high school, Jack spent a lot of time outdoors, and knew he wanted to work in the woods.

"When I graduated from high school, I wanted to get a job with a logger," he said. "I read a newspaper article about a local man named Jeff Putnam who was the New Hampshire logger of the year in 1992, the year I graduated from high school." Jack called him and asked him for a job.

"He said 'No, I work alone,' and that was that," Jack said. "So I went and stayed with my grandfather in Maine for a while, and tried to get a job logging up there. I always got the same answers. They either said, 'I work alone,' or 'You have no experience or background and I'm not hiring someone like that.'"

So Jack figured that if he couldn't get a job logging he would go to college and went to the University of Montana for four years. After college, as Jack was moving back east, Jim Hourdequin, a friend who knew he had wanted to get a job logging, mentioned that he knew a logger in the area who might hire him.

"Jim was a biology major and something of an environmental activist when he was going to Dartmouth College," Jack said. "The student environmental group had presented a mock logging award to a Dartmouth alum, and there was a newspaper article about it. A local logger named Russell Barnes saw the article and called Jim and said, 'Hey, if you're concerned about logging, I'll come show you some problems in our own back yard.'" The logger and the college kid became friends, and eventually started the Yankee Forest Safety Network to try to address high workers comp costs for loggers.

Jim connected Jack with Russell, and Jack went over to Russell's house.

"He had a Paul Bunyan T-shirt on, and when I showed up he said, 'Did you bring your axe?'" Jack said. "I said, 'We get to use axes?'"

Russell was willing to hire Jack and train him, so Jack went to work for him in 1998. A year later, Russell, Jack and Jim restructured Russell's business into a corporation owned by the three of them and some outside investors.

"The three of us started Long View Forest, Inc. in 1999," Jack said. At the same time, the partners invested in a new Rottne forwarder, and planned to sell Russell's old forwarder.

"However, we didn't get any offers we liked for the old forwarder, and I knew some people we could hire," Jack said. "So we kept the old forwarder, and went from one crew to two crews. We hired some inexperienced guys I knew but we were also lucky enough to hire Jeff Putnam-the same NH logger of the year I asked for work right out of high school. Between Jeff and Russell there was enough age and experience to keep us young guys more or less out of trouble. Jeff is still with us today and cutting trees by hand outdoing and outlasting just about everyone at 40 years and counting! Today we're a cut-to-length business with six harvesters and six forwarders and run between four and six crews, depending on the time of year and the circumstances."

The business changed again in 2013, when Russell retired.

"Jim and I bought him out, and then it was just the two of us," Jack said. "However, we had always aspired to broaden ownership of the company, and we've done that in the last four years. We're a C corporation that went from the three of us to the two of us, and now we've brought in additional employees into ownership over the last three years. So as of today there are 20 fulltime employees and 13 of them are shareholders."

So far, it's working out well.

"It's a relatively new thing to have ownership broaden beyond the two of us, but we've always had a very open and transparent style of management," Jack said. "We do monthly all-company meetings and we share a lot of information about how the business is doing with everyone. We've always had a 50 percent profit sharing program, so we distribute 50 percent of the profits at the end of the year to our full group of employees."

Jack said that this approach was partly a personal preference for both him and Jim.

"We obviously are not a family business, so we didn't have that approach to the logging business going for us," he said. "We feel that the way to attract and keep really good people is to make good opportunities available to anyone in the business. There are a lot of talented people out there who want to participate in ownership. For instance, Mike King operates our BARKO harvester. Mike started

working for us at age 18 when he finished high school in 2005. Many people have told me over the years that we won't keep Mike because he's too talented and will go off and start his own business. I think part of what has kept him and others with us is that we try to provide information about how the business is doing, the best compensation we can, and provide opportunities to be part of the management and ownership of the company. Mike was one of the first employees to become a part owner of the business once we were prepared to do that."

The area where Long View Forest is located is a mix of small towns and some forestry.

"There are plenty of sawmills and logging companies," Jack said. "It's definitely part of the economy of the area, but if you aren't aware of it or looking for it you don't see it. There are a lot of little hills and roads and dense forests."

One thing that's not local to the area is paper mills.

"The paper mills we sell to are 80 to 200 miles away," Jack said. "And the driving here is very slow, with lots of hills and winding roads. So it's two to four hours to get anywhere with a load of pulpwood from here." The company sells to Finch Paper and International Paper in New York, and Catalyst Paper in Maine.

Besides adding employee/owners, Long View Forest is about to undertake some facilities changes.

"The facility we're in is a small building with about 800 square feet of office space and a one-bay shop," Jack said. "We bought it in 2010, but the business has grown a lot and we've outgrown it. We're just in the process of closing on a 28-acre industrial property in Hartland, VT where we're going to build a new office and a larger shop. We're planning to keep the location that we have and also build this new facility, which will accommodate our northern crews and some further growth and expansion we hope."

Besides logging, Long View Forest also does forest management and woodland services.

"We have four people on staff who do forestry plans, boundary maintenance, tree marking and timber harvest prep, and invasive plant control," Jack said. "We have a set of landowner clients that they do that work for, and some of those landowners also use our business for logging; some of them use other loggers as well. We joined with a consulting forester named Andy Sheere a number of years ago who we had done a lot of work for, and we also work for other foresters as well. We always wanted to be involved with forest management and are a group of people who really care about long term forestry, so it was an amazing opportunity we're all grateful for to join forces with Andy. We now really have these two parallel separate businesses, a forest management business and a contracting business."

Jack said that the area where Long View Forest operates is considered a transition area from the hardwood forests to the south and the Northern Boreal Forest that is spruce-fir and northern hardwoods.

"We see every species," he said. "We're in the Connecticut River Valley, where we have lots of white pine and red oak. When we go up into the mountains, we get spruce-fir, sugar maple and yellow birch. The list of species we deal with on a regular basis is huge. Softwoods include spruce-fir, hemlock, white pine and red pine. In hardwoods, we see red oak, sugar maple, yellow birch, black birch, beech, ash, aspen, white birch, and cherry. It's a really wide range of species."

Besides the three pulp mills that Long View Forest sells to, the company's customers include firewood operations.

"The largest ones are Treehugger Farms and Darcy Nelson," Jack said. "They do many thousands of cords a year. We also sell to about six or seven others with smaller operations."

The company also cuts saw timber.

"We sell to maybe a dozen different mills on a regular basis," Jack said. "We do quite a bit of business with Allard Lumber. Britton Lumber and Mill River Lumber are white pine sawmills we do a lot of business with. We also work with Durgin and Crowell Lumber and Cersosimo Lumber locally, and we sell hardwood on a regular basis to Ethan Allen. There also are a number of Canadian sawmills that we deal with regularly, mostly for softwoods. There's a lot of variety in what we do."

Jack said that Long View Forest doesn't own any trucks capable of moving timber from the woods to the mills.

"We've never owned anything larger than a one ton pickup truck," he said. "We subcontract all of our trucking because we think logging is hard enough on its own and we're really lucky to have truckers who take really good care of us. Hansen Savage Trucking and Kent Fairbrother haul for our southern crews. Up north, Murdo Limlaw Trucking moves our wood."

Recently, Long View Forest purchased two pieces of equipment from Pete's Equipment Sales and Rental, Inc. in Morrisville, VT.

"We've been keeping an eye on BARKO and the 260 harvester that they've been developing," Jack said. "When we decided to buy a new harvester last year, we talked to a number of different companies and got in touch with Pete's Equipment because we wanted to consider the BARKO. They were super responsive and got right back to us and came and visited us. Pete's Equipment took us to Wisconsin to visit the factory and look at machines in the woods. We came back very impressed with BARKO the company and the machine that they had designed."

Jack's team also looked at the Log Max 7000XT head on that trip.

"We had actually owned one Log Max 750 head that we really like on a Rottne rubber tired harvester, so we had some familiarity with Log Max and knew it to be a strong brand," Jack said. "So we didn't have to think too hard about going with the Log Max head on the BARKO harvester. We also came back from the trip very impressed with Josh Fallon from Log Max. We met him in Wisconsin and he's been out to visit us in Vermont at least three times in the first year we've had the machine. He's really knowledgeable."

Jack said he expected the new setup with high visibility in the BARKO cab and computerized features in the Log Max head would easily handle the mixed variety of timber sizes and species that Long View Forest cuts.

"We cut everything from small, lightweight spruce-fir trees to 30-inch oaks," he said. "One factor for us was what Mike King said. He was running a Cat 501 at the time, and he said that he felt like—as the operator—he was going to experience a lot less fatigue sitting in the BARKO running the Log Max because while he can handle the wood we cut with the Cat 501, the BARKO and Log Max were going to be able to do the job much more easily. The machine wouldn't be straining and therefore neither would the operator."

Jack said that Mike has had exactly the experience he expected.

"It's kind of a funny intangible effect," he said. "But Mike has said that he feels a lot more relaxed and not as tired after running the BARKO for the day. We are extremely happy with it."

Jack said that Pete's Equipment has been as outstanding as the new equipment.

"They've been great," he said. "They've been very responsive to anything that has come up. They handled and

stood behind any warranty or parts issues. Jason Couture is the son of the founder and was taking over for his dad during the time we were looking at the BARKO. That could have been tough for a lot of businesses but Jason and his dad Pete worked together and made sure everything went smoothly for us from first talking, to

visiting BARKO, to taking delivery of the machine. Jason and his whole team at Pete's Equipment has been great to work with and their family approach to business shows."

Jason said that the BARKO/Log Max combo is a larger piece of equipment than what Long View Forest has been running.

"Now they're able to perform operations that they weren't able to previous to them having the BARKO," he said. "The machine has performed well and has done everything they expected it to do and more."

"Jack took a leap of faith when they bought it from us, because that was the second feller buncher Pete's Equipment had sold," he said. "But we're different from the big companies because we know our customers and we're consistent in our tenacity to take care of our customers. We really try to set ourselves apart."

Jason said that Long View Forest is the best organized company he has ever worked with.

"They have records of how they maintain their equipment during the day," he said. "Jack is so organized, and their facility is of the highest quality; the quality of their work shows it. It's really neat to be able to work with a company of this caliber."

Jason said he had to work hard to meet Jack's goals.

"I stuck my neck out some, and he stuck his neck out some, and it's worked out pretty well," he said. "They knew before they bought the machine how many hours it had to work, how much it had to produce, and were gambling that just maybe they could get a little more up time that would make the difference in production with this machine. This company has the best game plan going forward on a day to day basis and has employees who care. It's a company with really high standards. I hope our relationship continues."

Jack has the same kind of praise for Log Max that he has for Pete's Equipment.

"They're of course a big company, but they are every bit as responsive and on the ball as Pete's Equipment is," he said. "Josh Fallon and even Greg Porter, the president of Log Max North America, have visited us and checked in just as much as Pete's Equipment has, which has all of us really impressed."

Over the next few years, Jack said, one big goal of the Long View Forest team is to develop the new property that the company is buying.

"We want to expand and develop the same type of integrated operation that we have in our core business location," he said. "In five years, if we could be operating another two crews so that we've gone from six to eight crews in our work area, that would be really great."

The thing about his job that he likes the most, Jack said, is that he really enjoys the mix of experiences he has in the business.

"I didn't realize I was going to end up in business, but I really enjoy the everyday challenges and the way the rubber meets the road in decision making," he said. "You have to make a lot of decisions that have a direct and real impact on your business and on other people. I enjoy forestry in particular because of the mix of the outdoors and business. That whole thing is really appealing to me."

Jack concluded, "I guess I'd say that more than anything our company has been successful because of the incredible team of people we've been fortunate to work with. Besides the few I've already mentioned there are many others who have had a big impact over the years. From Rod Lampe who pioneered our shift to mechanization to Dylan Kidder who started our operations to the north. Basically I'd like to recognize all of my co-workers if there was space in your article! I'm grateful to everyone I've been lucky to work with so far and just hope our business can live up to their efforts and talents going into the future."