

LIMITED SCALE LOGGING IN SOUTHLAND'S EXOTIC FORESTS

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I have been involved with logging in the Southland region for nine years - three years with the N.Z. Forest Service and six years with J.E. Watson & Co Ltd of Invercargill.

During this period the local industry has never really flourished except for the occasional log export operation, and as such there have been frequent changes of bushmen and contractors.

Unfortunately the logging industry is a tough game and the frequent changes of bushmen has seen very little change in equipment and virtually no new logging methods or systems being introduced.

Logging operators and supervisors in Southland are no different to any others in New Zealand and generally those who remain in the industry are those who have the drive, initiative and the common sense to adapt to frequently changing conditions. The 'survivors' are those who are continually aiming to increase their productivity, resulting in a more economical operation for the grower.

However, it is the limited scale of Southland's resource and timber processing industry that restricts the development and stability of the logging operators.

Southland has an exotic forest resource of 94,852 hectares of which 2610 hectares are between 25 and 29 years old, and 7095 hectares are 30 years and older. We have an annual cut of approximately 85,000 m³ for seven sawmills. The resource or annual cut is not large enough to support large or diverse industries. To date the only market for forest produce in Southland is post material and sawlogs with a small quantity of peeler logs being sold to the West Coast. The current local demand for sawn timber is very poor and most Southland sawmills rely heavily on the insecure export markets for sawn timber.

Southland logging operators often find their employment is as 'buoyant' as the export markets and as such have found themselves virtually jobless overnight.

To help overcome this eventuality their equipment tends to be conservative and versatile so that they can be employed on alternative work for the local Catchment Board or for agricultural work etc.

People in the Southland logging scene are well aware of the

up-to-date equipment and systems available, but to implement them requires added financial input which generally is difficult to arrange because of our depressed markets both locally and abroad.

Finance houses are reluctant to support our loggers without some assurance of long term contracts. We have had many instances in our own region where logging contractors and transport operators have considered investing in or developing a small hauler, forwarder or self loading logging rig. There is nothing new about any of these in the industry but each would be a major step in the Southland region, particularly where the majority (55%) of the annual cut comes from the private forest resource and because of the general location of these plantations or forests, the logging and loading costs by conventional means can be expensive. However, any development is again limited by the very fact that (a) finance is generally not given to loggers without long term contracts or assurances of work, and (b) the contractor cannot get long term contracts through lack of stable markets.

At gatherings such as these many excellent papers are presented, most of which are technical and very informative. Unfortunately today I have nothing new in the logging scene to report from the Southland region - but I do hope I have highlighted the difficulties our loggers have before them when faced with the introduction of any new development in logging.

Sure we have new loggers coming and going, but the scene is much the same as it was a decade ago, i.e.

1. Relatively small, scattered resource;
2. Adverse climate and ground conditions;
3. Insecure markets, both local and export;
4. Limitation of product types, i.e. no board plants, chipmill or paper mill;
5. Difficulties in securing finance;
6. Lack of skilled labour due to insecure nature of logging industry.

What then is the future for the Southland logger?

Until the end of this decade I see no major expansion in the annual Southland cut and as such I see little change in the logging systems being implemented.

For most of the forests in the Southland area there are more economical means of production than those used now, and these are known to most of us in the industry. However, the loggers still in the business know that those same systems are much more site-specific and, without regular work available for them, prefer to stick to equipment with low overheads during slack periods. It is both the grower and end-user who pay for this in additional costs when the equipment is producing which is the problem which has brought us to this seminar.

Loggers who remain with these conventional systems will attract

their critics and professional advisers who will continue to suggest investing in or adopting new systems. Until the demand for wood rises, that will continue to be a risky and expensive business. Many of us have done contract pricing and know the problems of having a realistic price accepted; a worse problem when new or frequently idle equipment is considered.

All regions have loggers who are on call to produce the final few thousand cubic metres of that region's timber demand. Southland is, at the moment, still in the situation where almost all the demand falls in that category.

